PEARSON



CASTE IN LIFE

Experiencing Inequalities

Editors
D. Shyam Babu
R. S. Khare

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An imprint of Pearson Education



Delhi • Chennai • Chandigarh

Contents

Preface

We may not like it, but the fact remains that caste never leaves the centre stage in India. Caste never becomes passé; nor does it stand still. That change and continuity of caste is the heart of this anthology. We are confident that our contributors have done, through their reminiscences, a commendable job to capture the reality. We are also sure that the volume contains insights that will fascinate both the scholar and the lay reader. It has been our endeavour to contribute a new genre of personal sketches of caste to the considerable scholarly body of literature on the subject. The reader alone can judge how far we have succeeded in our effort.

Even a seemingly simple task of compiling an anthology demanded the help of friends and colleagues too numerous to list here. We record our deep gratitude and appreciation to them. Our respective institutions were kind and always willing to encourage us with whatever help we needed. The Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, hosted several meetings, where we interacted with some of the contributors to discuss the nuts and bolts of the project; and the Sesquicentennial Fellowship, the Center on Critical Human Survival Issues, University of Virginia, enabled us to work on this project successfully.

Arun Mukherjee deserves a special mention. Having come on board as a contributor, Arun has always encouraged us with new ideas and also her willingness to help us. We wish we had been able to carry out her advice of including a few interviews with those too old or too busy to write a paper but had a story to share. Arun spared time from her busy schedule and translated Omprakash Valmiki's contribution.

Introduction

Caste baffles. The moment one moves to explain the phenomenon, beyond its basic definition in that it is a form of social stratification, one falls into a proverbial rabbit hole. One may trace the origins of the caste system in the *Rig Veda*, only to be confounded by a two-century-old argument that it has no religious sanction. The evolution of the caste system over three millennia and the present-day practice thereof are thus shrouded with untold ambiguity. Even the Colonial period, which helped India regain much of its antiquity, contributed to the confusion owing to its complicity in rendering the practice rigid. A century-long scholarship has covered much of this ground and more. Then, why is there a need, one might ask, for another book, this one, on caste?

As this Introduction is being written, in mid-2007, two developments have caught India's attention. One is the Gujjar agitation in Rajasthan demanding their 'caste' be included among the Scheduled Tribes. The Gujjars, until now designated as an Other Backward Caste, want an ST status presumably for two reasons. First, being relatively better endowed than the traditional tribals, the Gujjars would stand a better chance of securing affirmative action benefits. The OBC category is more diverse, and reservations currently cater to only half of the numbers in the group. The second reason for this agitation is the Gujjars' desire to be treated on par with the Meena tribe, which by the way was a caste at the time of Independence.

It is a different matter whether their claim is justified or not. But the ensuing violence, and its vehemence, has shocked the nation. The more numerous Meenas opposed the Gujjar demand, perhaps not wanting to let another caste claim tribal status, and threatened counter violence. Though the conflict was contained, for a while the spectre of a caste war between the Gujjars and Meenas appeared inevitable. The episode symbolizes how caste remains the totem for identity and social mobilization.

The other development is the election of Ms Mayawati, a Dalit politician, as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. That Ms Mayawati could win a simple majority all by herself—a first for anybody in the state since 1991—was possible only because the other non-Dalit caste groups, especially the Brahmins, cast their votes in her favour. How could such a thing happen in a caste-ridden society? How could the Brahmins, who are at the top of the caste hierarchy, on their free will and volition support a Dalit, who is an outcaste, heading her own party? Does it matter anymore to discuss caste as if it were the organizing principle of the Indian society, a factor in public policy, etc?

More importantly, which of these two developments—the Gujjar—Meena conflict or the Brahmin support for a Dalit politician—represents the Indian social reality? An attempt to write this Introduction a year earlier or a year later would have benefited from similar examples, illuminating in their immediate context no doubt but confusing as generalizations.

Before this project started, we were keen to do a survey of how the social sciences in India had fared in accounting for the influence of caste on our society, government and market. In our view the rationale for undertaking such an exercise was quite evident. For one thing, the Indian academia has not produced enough quantitative or qualitative literature on caste, compared to the tomes available

on race in the United States. This is by no means to belittle the seminal contributions Indian scholars have made on the subject. But most of that has come from the usual suspects in the fields of Anthropology and Sociology. Then, what of the others? The neglect of caste by the Political Science and Economics branches, for example, carries the mistaken connotation that caste has no bearing on politics, government or the economy. Wouldn't it be interesting then to survey the field and question the scholars on what's going on?

We were fortunate to come across the highly acclaimed volume edited by Bernestine Singley, *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories*.[1] As its title indicates, the book presents the contributions of Black and White writers narrating their experiences of confronting race in their day-today lives, and how they reconciled—or failed to reconcile—with the reality of race in American society. Frankly, we were excited at the prospect of repeating Singley's exercise on caste.

But there is nothing black and white about caste; it comes literally in thousands of hues. Is it possible for a volume of, say, 25 biographical sketches to present a coherent picture of caste? Then, who might those 25 writers be? Is it possible to draw 'representatives' from the caste strata? What about North-South and rural-urban divisions? Then, what about the gender issue? Can a single volume address all these challenges and remain meaningful? We also suspected that a future reviewer might repeat, after having gone through the volume, the last two lines of John Godfrey Saxe's famous poem, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*: 'Though each was partly in the right/They all were in the wrong!'

We adopted the only way out of the maze by restricting the scope to a single reality— the fast-changing India. The transformation the country is witnessing at the beginning of the 21st century has given our contributors the perfect setting. Most of them were born by the early 1970s; they 'lived' caste and witnessed what it meant within their families and neighbourhoods. Then they moved on, and that 'moving on' reflects what has changed in India. Let there be no mistake: there are millions still seeped in caste, some treating it as an asset and others suffering it silently. At the other end of this spectrum is the urban generation born after the mid-1970s, who represent the crème de la crème of modern society. Some are business or software wizards, others lead the media and consumer revolution, and the least among them man call centres but earn more than what earlier generations could relate to. They are the talk of the town. It is customary for the media to project this generation as the new face of India. Then, doesn't this generation represent the country? Shouldn't we have solicited their stories?

We decided against doing so for the following reason. The privilege of witnessing the changing India through their personal experiences truly belongs to the generation we have chosen. The next generation is, in fact, the product of the change. As a result, the generation born in urban areas after the mid-1970s has hardly had any experience with caste. Asking them of their caste experiences would only elicit bewilderment. Leaving aside analyses and explanations, there is one hope that we and our contributors share: the larger social transformation that we have tried to capture through our stories is one of how India is changing for the better. The process of this change, still far from over, will be slow yet certain; and maybe, after a couple of decades, one will be able to find a group of people who can talk about their brush with caste mostly as an aberration in their memories of

childhood and not as something they cherish or regret from a bygone era. Lest we sound naïve we hope, realistically, not that caste will disappear without a trace, but that over the decades it will lose its rough edges and its potential to hurt.

When we approached them, our contributors immediately liked the idea and came on board, though some of them had had no professional or personal association with us. We spared no attempt to make the group as diverse as possible in terms of its caste and geographical composition, etc. We also invited three non-Indians (two Americans and a Briton) who had made seminal contributions to the study of caste as an academic subject. With the exception of the fiction writers in the group, most others had never attempted a first-person narrative, but they cheerfully endured, as they assured us they would, the task of plumbing their past to weave their stories. On our part, the pleasure of working with such a wonderful team outweighs all the trouble we took to compile the volume.

Each of the narratives stands on its own and does not need any editorial summary. In fact, our discretion was limited to selecting the contributors and at no time did we try to influence the outcome. However, a couple of explanations may be in order so as to place the volume in perspective.

The reader will notice a certain similarity of tone in most of the stories. We think that our contributors may have unconsciously assumed the task of indicting caste from their present vantage points. For example, those whose caste locus had given them privileges now narrate the same with remorse instead of any nostalgia for the past. Their feelings are genuine and are to be welcomed. This similarity of tone emanating from across our diverse group of authors is not all that surprising; as we explained earlier, it is only to be expected of the generation we chose. Our narratives also testify to the fact that caste loses its operational meaning as one leaves home and neighbourhood in search of educational and job opportunities.

In a few stories, it is evident that the writer remains ambivalent on personal experiences and slips into impersonal commentary. The inner resistance, so to say, to revealing 'intimate' details of one's life, even in autobiographies, is an Indian trait. And it is wrong to suppose that caste is *not* an intimate matter for us Indians. Leaving aside politicians who pander to caste groups on purpose, most urban Indians feel defensive on the subject of caste, preferring rather to subject themselves to a cognitive dissonance. For them, caste does not matter, but they occasionally suffer it at marriages and other rituals. This aspect, however, raises a different question. If ambivalence on caste is an Indian trait, as we believe, how far have the other contributors who have stuck to personal narrative managed to break out of the tradition? Have they chosen only instances that they are comfortable to reveal? You are the best judge to deconstruct the text, and we leave the volume in your hands.

1

Caste as a Non-Reality

Bibek Debroy

Bibek Debroy is Professor, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. A professional economist, he was educated at the Presidency College (Kolkata), the Delhi School of Economics and the Trinity College (Cambridge). He authored, edited or co-edited more than 60 books on themes as diverse as Indian economy, judicial reforms, foreign trade and the Hindu scriptures. Currently, he is authoring a ten-volume unabridged English translation of The Mahabharata. *He is a consulting editor of many financial newspapers in India. He was Director, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi. He was a consultant to the Ministry of Finance. He is presently a member of the National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council.*

When did I first confront caste as an issue? Before answering, a brief resume of my upbringing and schooling is in order. I am a Bengali and was born in Shillong, then a part of Assam and now the capital of Meghalaya. My grandparents, on both sides, migrated there from what is now Bangladesh, more specifically, from Sylhet. My father's surname was Debroy, which meant my ancestors were petty *zamindars*. My mother's maiden name was Dutta. Debroy is not a very common Bengali surname, and is actually a compound of Deb and Roy, originally written separately. Both Debroys and Duttas are Kayasthas, a term that has acquired a completely different operational significance in Bengal as opposed to its original meaning. My first school was a Western missionary one, named St Peter's, in Shillong. I studied there till the age of ten and a half. I cannot remember a single instance of caste having been important in St Peter's. Class, however, was important. (Given my father's socio-economic status, I didn't actually belong there.) I was a day-scholar and was a second-class citizen; boarders were the privileged lot. It was also very important whether you spoke English at home or not.

Did I never encounter 'caste' in those first ten-and-a-half years? Only once, to the best of my recollection. And not in school. We had some neighbours and they were Chakrabartys. According to popular belief, with presumably some basis in history, there were no Brahmins in Bengal at one point in time. The Chaitanya influence and the fact that the bulk of Bengal was a Buddhist kingdom for more than four centuries (something not always appreciated) had demolished the caste system somewhere along the way. Consequently, in Bengal today, one can easily identify the Brahmins and the SCs/STs. Anything in between is a bit of a muddle, which is one reason why Bengali reactions to caste tend to be somewhat different. To come back to the legend, Brahmins had had to be imported from Kanauj. Four Brahmin families had undertaken the migration—the Chattopadhyays, Bandopadhyays,

Gangopadhyays and Mukhopadhyays, and they brought along a cook named Chakrabarty. (All these surnames have variations in spelling.) The Chakrabartys, thus, are a 'lower' category of Brahmins. Anyway, this family had a younger son, about five years older than me. I was friendly with him and looked up to him as some sort of a leader. However, that apart, I have no recollection of our families visiting each other socially. Hellos exchanged across the fence summed up the extent of our intimacy. Nor do I have too many recollections of my visiting their house. Instead, this *dada* would come to our house. On one occasion, however, I did visit them, around the time they had lunch. As was customary then, food was had in the kitchen and I was offered some kind of dessert. But I wasn't allowed inside the kitchen and had to eat it standing outside. I remember a certain bewilderment rather than any resentment at the treatment, and I remember asking my parents for an explanation. Whatever the explanation, it wasn't convincing enough to a child, since I remember the bewilderment and not the explanation.

At the age of ten-and-a-half years, I moved to a school just outside Kolkata, in Narendrapur, a missionary and boarding school that was completely different, since it was run by the Ramakrishna Mission. The Ramakrishna Mission culture held that neither class nor caste mattered. Indeed, the kind of things that you could take with you to hostel was strictly regulated, so that one's class background didn't show. I remember two incidents from this school. I had a friend who was a Muslim and he came to visit us when I was at home during a vacation. The fact that he was a Muslim was never important in school. We ate together and mixed freely. Yet, when he came home and was offered a glass of water, he insisted on drinking the water without touching the glass with his lips. Some people do this, but he was not in the habit of doing this in school. At that time, I was old enough to ask about this odd behaviour and the explanation was the obvious one. The second incident had nothing to do with religion, at least not directly. In school, there were several hostels and in each hostel, there was a prayer room. A hostel resident was put in charge of this prayer room and his duty was to light incense sticks, prepare *prasad*, collect flowers and make garlands. The duties were particularly heavy on Sundays, when other students had the opportunity to rest. There were no deities in the prayer room, only photographs of Shri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. They were woken up in the morning and put to sleep at night. Incidentally, there was a prayer in the morning and yet another one in the evening. There weren't too many takers for this prayer room duty, since it coincided with physical education classes in the morning and games sessions in the evening. However, for the five years I was in Narendrapur, I had consistently volunteered for this prayer room duty. No questions were ever asked in school about how a non-Brahmin could have been given such a task. But I do remember one of my relatives asking me about this and I am certain that my answer didn't satisfy him.

In passing, yet another incident seems to be distantly related. From Narendrapur, we were once taken on a South Indian tour, soon after I moved there from Shillong. In those days, several young Englishmen used to come to Narendrapur on volunteer duty to teach us English. They were fresh undergraduates and stayed with us for a year or two, before returning to England. One such teacher accompanied us on this South Indian tour and we went to the famous temple in Kanyakumari. However, his entry was barred because he wasn't a Hindu. By all accounts, I led a revolt and argued

with the priests and our teachers, the upshot of all this being that none of us went inside the temple. The system didn't change, but we opted out.

This takes me to my undergraduate studies in Presidency College, Kolkata, in the early 1970s. I went on to teach in the same college during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In comparing my student days with my tenure as a teacher, I must shed light on the transformation that I noticed in the student population. When I was a teacher, the students seemed to be almost entirely from Kolkata and were far more Westernized. When I was a student, there was a significant *mofussil* crowd. Thus, when I was a student, there was a distinct Kolkata-versus-the-rest-of-Bengal divide and the twain didn't usually meet, mix or mingle. When I was a teacher, notwithstanding the Left Front government's attempts to curb elitism, Presidency College seemed to have become more elitist. In my student days, this class divide was palpable, but I don't remember caste having ever been an issue. One must also remember that the early 1970s was the period when a communist movement, of the violent variety, encompassed Bengal and this must have had a dampening effect on both class and caste. I moved on for my postgraduate degree to Delhi. Delhi School of Economics was elitist and there was a Kolkata (mostly from Presidency College) versus Delhi (mostly from St Stephen's) divide, with the latter category numerically far superior to the former. But I don't remember caste having ever been an issue. Nor was it an issue when I went abroad to study. Indian and South Asian students mixed and ate freely. For some Indian students, liquor, vegetarianism and eating beef were issues. But that isn't quite caste.

I have already remarked on my teaching days in Presidency. That was also roughly the time when I got married. It wasn't an arranged marriage. Had it been one, I have no idea whether caste would have been an issue. It just so happened that my wife and I were from two different castes. She was a Vaidya, which in Bengal has a different connotation from what the expression represents elsewhere in India. When I was born, a horoscope had been made. I have no idea where it is now. However, I must have gone through it at an age old enough for it to register, because I remember the horoscope stating that my wife would belong to a lower caste, and flagging that point as a big issue. I am still not clear about whether Bengali Vaidyas are superior or inferior to Bengali Kayasthas. I suspect the former, in which case, the horoscope was plain wrong. But more to the point, Bengal went through a Brahmo influence and many Vaidyas, including my wife's family, were Brahmos. There was, thus, an issue about whether we should get married through the civil marriage route or if there should be a ritualistic Hindu marriage. We opted for the latter, even if that meant that some of my in-laws boycotted the ceremony proper. But caste never entered the debate. And when our sons asked about their caste, since they confronted this question outside home, we have always responded to the effect that this is an irrelevant question that has no satisfactory answer.

Perhaps being a Bengali distorted my perspective, for I don't remember caste having been an important issue until we moved to the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. I have been told, and have never bothered to check the veracity of this statement, that the University of Pune had a bar on appointing non-Brahmins to teaching positions. Apparently, this rule has changed now, but existed in the early 1980s. But even at that time, Gokhale Institute retained some autonomy and in all fairness, I was never asked about my caste at the time of my interview or at the time of my

appointment. But once I had joined, all kinds of people I got introduced to asked me what kind of Brahmin I was. At that stage, I wasn't even aware that there were different kinds of Brahmins. In many ways, Pune (not Gokhale Institute) was very Brahminical and I pondered over the conundrum of what a non-Brahmin was doing in a teaching position. I thereby arrived at the two following insights. First, according to the *Puranas*, there are no Brahmins in the *kali yuga*, since *dharma* is non-existent in the *kali yuga*. (More elaborately, *dharma* is said to have had four legs in *satya yuga*, three in *treta yuga*, two in *dvapara yuga* and only one in *kali yuga*. Also, according to the *Puranas*, Brahmins in the *kali yuga* are worse than Shudras.) Second, Brahmins were teachers and since I was a teacher, I could pretend to be a Brahmin by occupation, if not by birth. There was another faculty member in Gokhale Institute who was even more of an oddity, because he was a Dalit. I consider myself fortunate that because of the environment I was exposed to, and because of my birth, education and upbringing, caste (or religion) has never motivated my reactions towards someone new I meet. I consider it a personal attribute, an accident of birth that has no significance whatsoever. Hence, I find it difficult to react to people to whom caste is important. And it was no different for this particular faculty member. I found it extremely odd that his being a Dalit was a phenomenon worth mentioning. Note that this wasn't mentioned in the context of a proposition that here was a Dalit who had overcome significant odds to attain a faculty position. Instead, a Dalit on the faculty deserved comment, a completely different proposition altogether.

As I have mentioned tangentially earlier, we eventually got tired of Pune, and its general small-town mentality had quite a bit to do with our decision to move to Delhi. I joined the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) as a professor, and caste became a complete non-issue, except twice a year. The first was at the time of admissions, when there was a reservation for SCs/STs and a corresponding dilution in admission standards. This is not the place to get into a debate on reservations, but I have no hesitation in stating up-front that I am completely opposed to reservations that are caste-based. Naturally, this tension surfaced in IIFT admissions, as they did on the second occasion when caste became important, at the time of placement.

By the time I left IIFT, two other things happened, both primarily professional. First, I got dragged into Indology as a matter of interest and even began to write on such matters as a dilettante. This exposed me to the caste-based inequities that Hinduism's sacred texts have perpetuated. This is certainly common knowledge. But to me, personally, it was a revelation. Second, my research interests broadened from foreign trade to other socio-economic matters and this exposed me to inequities in the name of caste that exist even today, and not in some hoary past. While I am proud to be an Indian, this is not an India I am proud of. Some of these instances make my blood boil. And I think it should be no different for all self-respecting Indians. As a Hindu by birth, I probably ought to believe in reincarnation. I can think of no better punishment for my worst enemy than that he (enemies have to be masculine) should be born as a SC/ST woman in one of India's backward districts in his next life.

Even though caste is a non-issue for me personally, I am constantly surprised at how important it is, or is perceived to be. For a couple of years, I interacted with some American high-school students. They had questions about India. These would be collected by their principal, sent by e-mail to me,

and I would respond. Caste and arranged marriages were extremely high on the agenda, as phenomena they found impossible to understand. And rather perversely, because I didn't want to denigrate India too much, I sometimes found myself in the unenviable position of attempting to defend the caste system. Last year, in the course of a seminar, I was chatting with a professor from Harvard and was aghast to discover that he thought that all Indian students who went to study to the United States were Brahmins. Admittedly, his subject was not related to any of the social sciences, but even then, this was nothing short of appalling. But such are the stereotypes our practices perpetuate.

One of the editors for this volume is D. Shyam Babu. We used to be colleagues at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS), and as Director of RGICS, I was involved in Shyam's interview and subsequent appointment. His candidature was recommended by someone fairly important, and in the course of that telephone call, this gentleman told me that Shyam was a Dalit. I remember asking him, how was that relevant? Despite having worked for several years as colleagues, I got to know that Shyam was a Christian only when we were together at a seminar in Germany. That too, because of a question asked by some German friends.

So when Shyam asked me to write this piece, I was reluctant. I had nothing to say. Caste (and religion) is a non-reality for me at a personal level. However, as an Indian, I accept that it has messed us up completely. But Shyam thought that even my version of 'nothing' was worth stating. I don't think there is a moral in this anywhere. Thanks to the accident of my birth, I have been plain lucky. And so have our children.

2

Forgetting Caste While Living It

The Privileges of Amnesia

Sankaran Krishna

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I was born in 1960 and grew up mainly in Bangalore and Madras. My parents are from the Tirunelveli district in southern Tamil Nadu. The invitation to contribute to this volume has made me think about my caste, something I have very rarely consciously done before. That I have not had to think explicitly about caste should straightaway reveal that I must be from one of the so-called upper-castes. The luxury of such amnesia is inconceivable to someone from a Dalit or lower-caste background.

As anyone who tries to write about caste possibly discovers, its everyday implications are difficult to describe and yet caste issues exert a very significant influence in one's realm of experience. A number of social practices are related to caste, and yet it cannot be reduced to them. Bookish definitions of the term or concept or practice always strike Indians as vaguely incomplete or as missing its essence. When asked by others what caste means, even (or perhaps, especially?) the most articulate of us flounders and fumbles through our replies. A good part of the reason might well be that most of us engaged in intellectual definitions and conversations on caste are possibly from the upper castes and, wittingly or otherwise, engage in a process that mystifies and moderates its reality when asked directly what it means. I am quite sure that a Dalit or a lower-caste person would be able to answer questions regarding caste with clarity and directness, possibly focusing on their first-hand experiences of being insulted or discriminated against.

My earliest memories about caste go back to the time around 1966 or 1967. We lived in the cantonment area of Bangalore in a very middle-class colony of about a hundred families. There were

people from all over India living in the colony— I can remember Sindhis, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Marathis, Malayalees, Coorgis, Anglo-Indians, Bengalis, Parsees and others—with Kannadigas and Tamilians being the most predominant communities. My brother was about four year older than me and we had been invited to a friend's birthday party. One of the dishes served that day was mutton puffs. We were strict vegetarians and my mother used to have difficulty even making omelettes for us (the family doctor had ordered this supplement to our diet because my brother, sister and I were, in his view, seriously underweight). I declined the mutton puffs, sensing I wasn't supposed to eat them. My brother, either blissfully unaware or curious, ate a couple. From that day on, he was teased mercilessly by a number of friends in the colony. They were mostly Tamil and would call him '*Kari thinna paapan* ('the Brahmin who ate meat'). I had not heard the word 'paapan' before and would not realize until many years later what it meant. Soon, word about the matter got to my parents but I do not recollect them being concerned about it one way or the other. It was dismissed as something that had happened. Besides, my father occasionally ate non-vegetarian food at office parties and social occasions—it was not considered any big deal.

Around the same time, some of the boys in the colony started making disparaging remarks about 'paapans' like us. I could not then figure out from where the animosity sprang and what, besides being vegetarians, distinguished us from them. Looking back, I realize that these were the years of anti-Hindi agitations in the neighbouring state of Madras (soon to become Tamil Nadu) and the rising swell of Dravidian nationalism that would shortly put the DMK in power there. Anti-Brahminism was an integral component of the movement, and I realize now that our Tamil friends were acting out what they were hearing at home. They obviously came from families with a more overt political consciousness and were more socially aware than me. The ragging was rarely serious and never escalated to anything physical. It never infringed on the healthy respect my brother commanded for his prowess in cricket, for instance. I do remember feeling rather puzzled by it all but it never occurred to me to ask either my brother or my parents what 'paapan' meant and why it was a bad thing. On one occasion, I remember being convinced by a number of friends to join them in calling my brother a '*kari thinna paapan* which I did with great gusto—much to his annoyance and my delight.

The other clear memory I have with regard to caste occurred a few years later. I must have been about ten or so at the time, and had come home with a survey given out by the school that we attended in Bangalore. I had no problems with the usual questions—name, parents' names, address, religion—but was stymied by one asking me for my caste. I remember asking my parents what our caste was. I was told to fill in 'Brahmin' and, strangely enough, that is the extent of my recollection. I do not remember asking them to elaborate or any ensuing discussion about what caste was and what it meant to be a Brahmin. There were taboos and customs within my family, which I now realize were indicators of our caste but had no idea that they weren't common practice among others. For instance, every time we went for a haircut, my brother and I would be marched straight to the bathroom for a bath—we were not allowed to touch anyone or anything until after. This was explained on grounds of hygiene, but there was an excess of energy about it that left you feeling there was more to it than just that.

These early memories intersect with another set of recollections: our annual trips to the villages of

my parents in Tirunelveli. Caste was more overt in the village than in a middle-class neighbourhood in Bangalore, but I had not yet connected the elaborate system of taboos and proscriptions in the village with it. Suddenly, there were strict rules on how you touched food and cooking utensils. Farm hands or other labourers would wait outside the house to meet my maternal grandfather who was a petty *zamindar*; they would remove their head-dress (or '*thalapa*') when speaking with him and seemed more deferential than anyone I had seen in Bangalore. Many grown men had '*kudumis*' or tufts of hair at the back of their shaven heads, and religious markings were far more prominent on everyone. My mother and other women would be sequestered in a spartan room in the back of the house for a few days of the month. None of this had to do with caste directly, except in that they marked us out as upper castes—something that I did not understand back then, but would in retrospect.

In my father's village, Pattamadai, the entire street was occupied by Brahmins, though looking back now how I knew that escapes me. My mother's somewhat larger village, Sankarankovil, did not have such strict spatial segregation, though again I am unable to describe how I know this to be true. Daily visits to the temple were the norm and prayers, *shlokas* and Sanskrit, very much a part of daily life in these villages. My older cousins would do the '*sandhyavandanam*' at least twice a day, and their '*poonals*' or sacred threads were prominent as they were often bare-chested. The annual trips to the village were a mixture of the delightful and the abhorrent. Getting together with all my cousins, bathing in the river, no school and homework were offset by the lack of indoor toilets, summer heat and dicey electricity.

While we observed all the important religious festivals, my parents were not particularly religious in an everyday sense. There were no daily prayers, and the little 'puja' room was not regularly used. I would occasionally seek supernatural help, especially when under-prepared for an exam, but was otherwise quite oblivious to its presence. Like many others of my generation, I encountered simplified versions of epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, often in the form of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. The three incidents that stand out for me from these epics are possibly the same for many others—the story of Ekalavya, Rama's slaying of Vali during his battle with Sugreeva, and Sita's ordeal after the return from Lanka. Obviously, the heroes of these epics come out looking very poorly in each of these episodes, and I recall being frustrated by the inability of my parents or others to give satisfactory explanations for them. There was, in retrospect, a strange form of evasiveness on their part: rather than answer the questions about the injustice meted out to Ekalavya on the basis of birth, or the cowardice of the gods, I (or other children in similar contexts) would be praised for raising such moral questions at such an early age.

In 1973, two years after we had left Bangalore and moved to Madras, it was decided that my brother and I would have our *upanayanam* (sacred thread) ceremony during our summer visit to Pattamadai. My parents were not particularly keen on the idea as we were still young and it would cost a lot of money. It was already common practice for many urban Brahmin boys to have their thread ceremony a day before their wedding day—thus fast-forwarding the process from *brahmacharya* to *grihasta* to less than 24 hours! But my grandmother, fearful that her time on earth was nearing an end, insisted that the ceremony be performed that very year. (*Paati*, having

blackmailed us into having the ceremony done right away, lived on for another 25 years before departing this world!) The 'poonal' ceremony was quite elaborate and, I guess, in many ways constituted the first tangible realization on my part regarding my status as a Brahmin. My father explained the content of the various *shlokas* to my brother and me, and the fact that the Gayatri mantra was over two thousand years old made an impression. I also remember being deeply impressed by the '*abhivadeya*' prayer in which one prostrates oneself (*namaskaram*) before one's elders and mentally recites the list of *rishis* from whom one is supposed to have descended. The fact that there were only a small number of *gothras*, that we were lineal descendants of a particular *rishi*, and that the '*abhivadeya*' ended with my own name, left me feeling vaguely special. To be the centre of attention and surrounded by a large number of relatives and practically the entire street in my father's village added to the sense of occasion.

Once the ceremony was over, all that had changed was the fact that I had this thread running diagonally across my upper body. Older cousins joked that the only real use their *poonals* had were as back-scratchers. I remember that prior to the ceremony, my main fear was that my head would be clean shaven: I was petrified at the prospect of returning to school as a '*mottai*' and the undoubted merriment it would cause amongst classmates. For ritual's sake, a barber took a few strands of hair off my brother and me, but that was that. From then on, we had to do the '*sandhyavandanam*' prayers three times a day—at dawn, noon and dusk. As we didn't know Sanskrit, the prayers were simply memorized and recited by rote. They seemed to take up an inordinately long time every day, and in the mean while, my precious summer holidays were rapidly coming to an end. I could not concentrate on the prayers as the sound of cousins playing cards or arguing over cricket distracted me no end. The three-times-a-day *sandhyavandanam* died a natural death after we returned to Madras. It became a once-a-day evening prayer for a few months and then faded out of my life altogether. The '*poonal* lasted a few more years, with annual renewals every August during the '*Aavani Avattam*' ceremony. I fancied myself as bit of a bowler back then and would often have to reach into my shirt to adjust the poonal so it stayed out of the way when playing cricket. This strange ritual of adjusting the poonal was common among many cricketers all over Madras and a sure-fire way of marking a player out as a Brahmin.

In those years (early 1970s), the *Illustrated Weekly of India* used to have special issues on specific communities in India along with photographs of the eminent among them. Around the time of my poonal, there was an issue devoted to the Iyers and I recall the sense of pride that 'my community' included the likes of Sir C. V. Raman, R. K. Narayan and R. K. Laxman, Subramanya Bharati, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the singer Madurai Mani Iyer and an array of other distinguished Indians from all fields. I remember asking my parents if we were remotely related to any of these eminent personalities and whether there was anyone of such repute in our own larger clan. I was disappointed that we were a particularly undistinguished lot. However, any sense of being special as an Iyer was always tempered by the fact that my school friends thought Brahmins lacked generosity, and were untrustworthy and selfish. That was regarded as a simple fact of life. If I were to act in any of these ways, and like many schoolboys I often did, one or the other of my classmates would remark that I had proven myself a Brahmin. On the flip side, if I acted in ways that were generous, a frequent

compliment was that I wasn't too bad for a Brahmin. Neither the insult nor the compliment seemed remarkable to me, as they were part of a larger set of stereotypes. Certainly the Muslim boys caught a lot more flak than us, with endless jokes about their circumcision. The Anglo-Indians and Sikhs were saddled with an image of being good in athletics but otherwise quite unintelligent. The few '*marwaris*' in our school were reputedly miserly, and so on. The fact that there were no stereotypes specifically emanating from caste, especially about lower castes, is interesting and by no means unusual in a largely middle-class school in Madras. I suppose it was in some part because there were possibly hardly any Dalits in the school at all. That is ironic because my school was named after a famous Malayali poet, Kumaran Asan, who was of the lowly Ezhava caste. This fact was well publicized and frequently mentioned during school functions and in our school diary. Yet, one did not spend a whole lot of time mulling on caste as such, and we alternated between making fun of each other based on stereotypes and being 'best friends'. '*Thair saadam* or curd rice was a favourite epithet to describe the Brahmin boys in reference to our supposedly inferior physical strength. It was not always said disparagingly and often used by Brahmins to describe each other as well.

By my early teens then, I was aware of my caste status as a Brahmin but it wasn't something that either preoccupied me or left me with any real sense of being special. In school, in the novels and newspapers I read (the same *Illustrated Weekly*, or it may have been *Sunday*, had serialized Ananthamurthy's Samskara around that time) and from a whole host of other sources all around us, it was clear to me that divisive categories such as caste had nothing to commend them. I remember having vehement arguments with a particular grand-aunt who was very orthodox in her practices and observances. I would try to convince her that her beliefs were nothing more than superstition, that her actions were insulting and spiteful to others, and that her beliefs contradicted, among other things, Hindu scripture (or what I thought I knew of them), what was written in my social studies text books, science, reason, the law and various other instruments of modernity. It was exasperating that she never took my arguments seriously and literally laughed them off as signs of an appealing immaturity. A frequent defence put up by her and others in such arguments was that caste had originated through division of labour in ancient societies and was thereafter perpetuated for 'hygienic' reasons. I could not fathom why that constituted an adequate justification for the practice or its continuance.

I was by now approaching my final year in high school. I was generally among the top half a dozen in the class but never first. At home, as is typical of many Iyer families, intelligence was equated with proficiency in mathematics and the sciences. And proficiency in the former was defined as securing 'cent percent' in every exam, something I don't recollect ever having done. I had a more natural inclination towards literature and the humanities in general, but these were seen as ornamental rather than substantive fields. Gaining admission into an engineering or medical college was seen as the ticket to a prosperous future. Given the level of competition and Tamil Nadu's long history of reservations, I could hope to break into the privileged circle of 'professional' colleges only by a spectacular performance in my examinations or by gaining entrance to one of the IITs. Neither happened. With my marks, there was no way anyone could blame reservations or anti-Brahminism in Tamil Nadu for my inability to gain admission into these 'professional' colleges. Once I overcame my disappointment (more at having let my parents down than anything else) I trudged off to the

‘amateur’ Loyola College for further studies.

My undergraduate major was Chemistry (my parents having scotched any ambitions I had of majoring in English literature or history on grounds they were a waste of time), but those three years were largely spent reading novels, *adda*, seeing movies, trying my hand at debating and quiz, writing for the college magazine, experimenting with recreational drugs, and playing various sports with much gusto but little skill. I lived in the hostel as my parents had by then moved to Calcutta. The pecking order in the hostel and the college was decided primarily on the basis of class: English-medium school boys with ‘propah’ accents and Levi’s jeans were at the top of the heap, while those educated in the vernacular and coming from the mofussil were at the bottom. The close intertwining of class and caste in Indian society was obvious to anyone who cared to look—the Westernized hep-cats were invariably upper-caste if Hindu, ‘ashraf’ if Muslim, Syrian-Christian or Goanese if Christian, and so on. Jesuit Loyola was an assiduously apolitical space, in contrast to the relatively politicized campuses like Madras Christian College, Presidency and the neighbouring Pachaiyappa’s. Even within Loyola, there must have been everyday negotiations between students over caste, class, and privilege—both overt and subtle—but students like me lived in an oblivious bubble. Looking back, I am sure the ‘vernacular’ students were steeped in the history of the Dravidian movement, the anti-caste struggles, and other aspects of Tamil and Indian history. Their debating societies and their section of the college magazine possibly reflected these issues in a big way. Yet, students like me had moved through Enid Blyton and Richmal Crompton in our school years to P. G. Wodehouse and Woody Allen in college, and the closest we had come to anything bordering philosophy was the work of Ayn Rand. If asked about caste at this stage of my life, I would probably have replied that while it was no doubt a pernicious institution, it was up to the individual to rise above his circumstances through his own efforts.

Sometime around my final year in Loyola, mainly because of listening to discussions among friends on subjects like economics, history and English, I became mildly politicized. Many of my friends were from Kerala and had grown up in a highly politicized context with student politics already driven along party factions. The strong tradition of Leftist politics had made these students quite radical in their thinking. Their take on a variety of contemporary and historical issues seemed far more well-informed and egalitarian than mine. We had just come out of the Emergency and Naxalism as a movement was still very much alive. Listening to such discussions and watching plays like Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* (staged by the Loyola Amateur Dramatic Society) made me realize for the first time the utterly narrow and middle-class worldview I had of things: I was everything that was being caricatured on stage. More on intuition than anything else, I decided to switch to the humanities for a Master’s degree. My parents had by now possibly thrown in the towel as far as guiding me towards a secure future was concerned, and I fed them the alibi that a switch to the humanities was a good idea for someone intent on becoming a journalist. A combination of luck and a way with words (thanks again to English-medium schools) got me into the Master’s programme in Modern Indian History at the Centre for Historical Studies in JNU in Delhi, although I had no background in the field whatsoever.

In retrospect, while JNU was in every way a transformative experience for me (I learned for the

first time the extent to which I was a product of a colonial society), caste as an object of academic inquiry remained strangely marginal. I learnt a great deal about the Indian national movement for Independence, about Marxism as a tool of socio-economic analysis, about colonialism, underdevelopment, and Eurocentrism, about all sorts of things, but caste—either theoretically or as a lived experience—seemed peripheral to our studies. In JNU, it was all about the nation on one hand, and the class of the individual, on the other, two abstractions that either by intent or accident rendered caste peripheral. When I read books or articles about caste, the prose turned strangely turgid and abstract—the works of Satish Saberwal, Andre Beteille, M. N. Srinivas, Yogendra Singh, and a number of others come to mind as exemplars. These seemed to be simultaneously over-analysed through abstractions and sociological jargon, and unreal because of the absence of the voices of actual lower-caste individuals and scholars and the texture of their everyday experiences. For all the focus on the Indian national movement, for which many of the professors at the CHS were renowned, I don't recall anyone working on Ambedkar, or his writings and contributions figuring at all in our curriculum. The radically different conception of the nation that he outlined and his critique of an anti-colonialism that left intact the sedimented hierarchies of caste were subtly marginalized on grounds that they ran counter to the struggle for Independence and were divisive in face of the primary contradiction against alien rule. The narrow framing of caste was revealed in the fact that anti-caste movements ('social movements') figured prominently in the cultural history course rather than in the ones on economic or political history. Leaders like Jyotirao Phule and 'Periyar' Ramaswami Naicker were cast within a narrative of tragedy—they gave prominence and priority to issues that were relatively less central to the anti-British and anti-colonial struggle and were, thereby, doomed to be no more than interesting footnotes in that larger struggle. Caste was conceptualized as a transitional aberration along the way to our becoming a nation—something to be overcome rather than constitutive of who we were as a nation. I must underline that this lacuna is evident to me only today—I was not conscious of it at the time at all.

The narrative of the nation-in-the-making also framed my own research papers at the CHS. I chose the topic of Dravidian Tamil nationalism for my seminar papers (for Professors Pannikkar and Bipan Chandra) and wound up reading a great deal of the writings of 'Periyar' E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (in Tamil), learning the history of the non-Brahmin movement, and much else about the history of my own region. Aspects of my past as a schoolboy in Bangalore and Madras began to now make sense. Periyar's radically deterritorialized understanding of the nation, and his often incredibly progressive and/or counter-intuitive ideas about women, the dignity of labour, British colonialism, miscegenation, and a host of other issues made a profound impression on me as I read his writings. Yet, in my seminar papers, my appreciation of such insights was sidelined and my overall narrative located him as a tragic figure out of step with the passionate pan-Indian nationalism of his time. His excoriation of caste and of Tamil Brahmins generally, I think, left its mark on my thinking. Reading the details of Gandhi's milquetoast vacillations on caste, and the unredeemed bigotry of many of the Brahmin leaders of the Congress in pre-Independence Tamil society primed me for a more critical attitude towards a narrowly political Indian nationalism in later years.

JNU was in many ways an illegible social space for me. Although I had by then travelled and lived

all over urban India I had never before encountered such an incredible diversity of Indians from all regions, castes, languages and class. The admissions policy, which was weighted in favour of students from under-privileged backgrounds, made it a unique campus in the context of Indian higher education. There was no student organization explicitly for Dalits or on the basis of caste. Yet, during student elections, Dalits were rumoured to be a vote bank whose support could be critical to winning. There must have been everyday encounters and negotiations around caste, especially amongst students from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and their vastly more nuanced and fine-tuned distinctions on caste contrasted with the more bi-polar situation in Tamil Nadu. What was clearly apparent was the tenacity of the enduring hierarchies in this space as well. The importance of the right accent of middle-class social origins, and urban backgrounds was evident all around. Levi's jeans were now accompanied by an earth-coloured *kurta* from Khadi Bhandar, and Ayn Rand had given way to Trotsky and Poulantzas, but the pecking order stayed largely intact. As I recollect the faces of the student leaders of my time, their oratorical skills were honed in St Stephens, Xavier's, Madras Christian College and Presidency, and they were overwhelmingly Brahmin or upper caste. And yet, the example of a student from one of the most backward districts in Bihar entering CHS with barely enough English to make a sentence, proceeding by the end of two years to outdistance all the rest of us in terms of scholarly excellence, has stayed with me. There could be no better counter to the endless humbug we choose to wallow in than examples like that, exceptional though they were. There was also no better lesson in humility and on the dangers of confusing privilege with ability.

With some honourable exceptions, the social circles in JNU were circumscribed by class and educational backgrounds. Like many others, I developed deep friendships with classmates I would not have encountered in a place other than JNU. Yet, when it came to more permanent choices regarding life partners, the traditional hierarchies of class, education, urbanity and other rubrics—which are always inevitably also tied to caste—endured. Relationships across regional and linguistic boundaries were the norm rather than exception, and my Bengali classmate from CHS would soon become my wife. As Andhras married Sikhs, Malayalis fell in love with Biharis, Assamese eloped with Kashmiris, Parsees made off with Kannadigas, and even the occasional Hindu—Muslim liaison, it was tempting to see the whole miscegenational orgy that was JNU as the crucible of a new and egalitarian nation in the making. The truth, however, is that these transactions were largely between similarly positioned classes in different parts of India, and not across the more enduring fractures that divided us. The language of love in every instance was English. Once my parents learned that my desired partner was educated at Loreto, LSR and JNU, and was the daughter of an IAS officer, the deal was in the bag. The fact that she was Bengali, enjoyed non-vegetarian food, and was not a Brahmin did not matter to anyone, not even the *Paati* who had insisted on my *upanayanam* many years ago!

I have no idea what it must feel like to be a Dalit in India, and I possibly never will. In some small way, though, coming abroad to the United States for higher studies in 1983 has made me understand to a greater degree what I think that experience must be like. In a literal sense, the word 'prejudice' probably means to 'pre-judge' someone or to evaluate them without knowing them. While I have not encountered any overt act of discrimination or racial insult in the United States, it is a strange

experience to be so often evaluated prior to the encounter. What I mean is this: as a visibly brown-skinned foreigner in a largely white society, often people assume I must be unfamiliar with American customs or mores, or in need of help. They will offer instructions or speak slowly so that I might better understand them. While such instances are rarer now, they were quite common in the 1980s especially outside the university campus. This would soon be followed by a comment that was not intentionally patronizing but carried a whiff of it: 'you speak English so well'. This last 'compliment' inevitably sent me off into a whirl of introspection. What does it mean to be commended for mastery over a language that is not one's own, and for a dexterity that is an index of one's colonization? Such interactions left me feeling as if my body, my colour, and my sheer physicality overwhelmed everything else about me. It was a continuous effort to dispel doubts that did not have any reason to arise in the first place. It was a feeling of constantly being on trial for something outside my control—for being and looking the way I did. For the first time in my life, I think I understood in some small way what it must feel like to be a minority, or to not be a part of the mainstream. And also for the first time in my life, I slowly began to realize all of the things that I could and did take for granted, while I was in India. The experience of having to prove oneself human and equal in every interaction is a troubling experience.

In my university in upstate New York, there were a large number of Indian students—mostly from the IITs and various other engineering schools, and a small smattering of students in the 'arts'. As one might readily surmise, we were overwhelmingly of upper-caste background. Blacks were derisively called '*kallus*' amongst the Indians and many entertained every stereotype about them. Similarly, students from East Asia (Koreans, Chinese and others) were referred to in derogatory terms, as were Muslim students from all parts of the world. Within the university setting, our fluency in English and the ease with which we went about our academic work made us model foreign students, a status we were only too glad to accept.

Around this time, a couple of incidents occurred that I remember very vividly and believe have much to do with the focus of this essay. The first occurred sometime in 1985 or 1986. It was a cold and snowy winter's morning and I was seated in the campus bus heading to the university. In the seat ahead of me were a white American student and an Indian student. They began conversing, and soon enough, the American asked the Indian about his experiences in the USA and whether he liked it, etc. I was paying an indifferent kind of attention to the conversation, expecting some version of 'yes, we have skyscrapers in Bombay too' or 'no, I did not go to school on an elephant' as a response. The Indian student (whom I had not seen before) spoke with a quiet intensity. He told the American that he felt like an Indian and an equal for the first time in his life only after coming to the USA. He was from a Scheduled Caste background and throughout his life had been berated and insulted at school and college. In America, he said, as far as you guys are concerned we're all the same, we're Indians. You don't care if some of us are lighter skinned or have the right accents, or have certain surnames and not others. He talked of the freedom he felt here that he had not had back home and that besides his parents and family, he felt he owed little or nothing to India. He proceeded in this vein until we reached the campus. I don't think he realized he had had an audience beyond his new-found American friend. I kept thinking about all he had said on that bus, and realized that our respective trajectories

were in some ways opposed to each other. He was discovering what it meant to be part of a collective, to not stand out, and the privileges that came with such anonymity, while I was experiencing what it meant to be visible minority for the first time in my life, realizing what it meant to navigate terrains that were not designed with me in mind.

The second incident occurred sometime in early 1988. It was habitual for many Indian graduate students to get together on weekends over 'potluck' parties and enjoy an evening in each other's company. As should be evident by now, this was basically a slice of urban, English-educated, upper-caste, middle-class India—only it happened to be in upstate New York rather than somewhere else. The beer flowed, the conversation was animated, and in the background a television played. It was a telecast of the then-ongoing winter Olympics, specifically the women's figure skating competition. There were two front-runners for the gold medal: an East German skater named Katarina Witt, and an American named Debi Thomas. Katarina Witt looked straight out of illustrations I remember from stories like 'Hansel and Gretel' or 'Rapunzel': she was a willowy, blue-eyed brunette with a strawberries-and-cream complexion. Debi Thomas was black, solidly built, and with a very athletic and powerful routine.

With almost no exceptions, the entire crowd of Indian students at that party was rooting for Katarina Witt, with hardly anyone supporting Debi Thomas. As Thomas skated onto the ice, people made disparaging and racist comments about her looks, her figure, and her abilities. As luck would have it, Thomas fell once during her routine, and the crowd around the television actually clapped and cheered in delight. Katharina Witt won the gold medal with what, to my eyes, looked like an anodyne routine showcasing her looks to good effect. The reaction in the room was ecstatic, with people actually exchanging high-fives as her scores were announced. Debi Thomas became the first black woman to win a medal at the figure skating Olympics—a bronze. What I saw in that room that day was the so-called cream of a society that was actually steeped in self-hate. Debi Thomas was a pre-medicine major at Stanford University, a wonderfully poised and accomplished young woman. She went on to become both an engineer and an orthopaedic surgeon, and works today at a hospital serving her community in south central Los Angeles. Katharina Witt attempted a career of sorts in Hollywood and posed nude for a girlie magazine after the end of her skating career.

Life abroad makes one realize other aspects of caste that can be ignored back home. A chore I am yet to feel comfortable with is cleaning the bathroom, specifically the commode. I especially detest the chore during times when we have house guests, and the act of cleaning up after someone else has used it is repellent. It forces me to remember the faces of various '*jamadars*' who cleaned the toilets in the homes we lived in in India, and the hundreds of others they cleaned every day. The servant maids who came and went, the large and invisible cast of the poor and unfortunate whose cheap labour collectively rendered our lives 'middle class' and enabled all of us the luxury of focusing on 'our work' remain unacknowledged in our biographies.

Caste is more subtly coded in the Indian community in the West, and, perhaps, to some degree it is less salient because it has been rendered moot by the very nature of Indian immigration to the USA. Class, education, wealth, home ownership and other attributes take pride of place, though caste has not by any means disappeared. In the small Indian community in Honolulu, it would appear to be a

distant and irrelevant issue—and for the most part, it is that. The luxury of being able to ignore caste underlines the upper-caste background of the community as a whole.

My wife and I have two boys and neither is aware that their father comes from a Brahmin family or what that means. We visit India almost every year, but their trips have not included any rites of passage that might foreground caste. My wife and I do not intend to have them initiated into their caste through a thread ceremony or talk about caste in any form. We eat non-vegetarian food on a regular basis, though I have never really taken to it despite all these years. If, as my boys grow older, they wish to pursue any aspect of their past that has to do with this part of their heritage, I will not stand in their way. I myself am a believer in a higher power or destiny and believe that we are accountable for our actions—both of omission and commission—in our lifetime. Whether that power is God, I don't know and don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about it. I would like my sons to grow up to be happy and caring about others.

Even as I write all this, I am struck by the immense luxury and power that inheres in the fact that these are choices I can make. I can decide the extent to which caste plays any role in my life. Fellow Indians recognize through an intangible set of clues that I am a Brahmin. My American friends are occasionally curious about the matter, and can intuit that only an upper-caste person can be so supremely indifferent or casual about his caste status. So I proceed through life, serene in the cocoon that an upper-caste birth has provided for me—its privileges are invisible but recognizable within the ex-pat community; it adds an aura in the eyes of some Americans; and it is something that is strengthened with every denial of its salience in my life.

Toni Morrison once wrote that any history of the United States that does not centre on the slavery of African-Americans and genocide of Native Americans must be a lie. We Indians with our narratives that constantly elide caste are living in a dream world of our own making. Any history about us that does not centre on the inhumanity and barbarity of caste is a lie. An authentic history of us remains to be written because it cannot be written by the twice-born. That history can only be written by those who know what it means to struggle to be regarded as human in the first place.

3

The *Unch-Nich* Challenge in Life

Changing Locations, Forces and Meanings#

R. S. Khare

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I

Caste and related social high-and-low (*unch-nich*) differences had been a fixture since the very early days of my life. I was born into a U.P. Kayastha family, headed by my 'worldly' paternal grandfather, a *taluqdar*, and my devout, orthodox grandmother. I vividly remember the early 1940s, spent in a sprawling residence, which was known to us as the *kothi*. Surrounded by a high boundary wall, the *kothi* had a big, ornate, iron main gate and a sizeable flower garden in front, and a large, three-storey, family residence at the centre. A mango orchard was at its right and it ended in a row of horse and carriage stables, a cow pen and a full, separate guesthouse on the left. A row of sixteen 'servant quarters' (called *parjon ki kothari*) lined its back. Our *kothi* was located in Lakhimpur Kheri, then a small town in the *tarai* region of Uttar Pradesh (then United Provinces).

My father, a lawyer, would manage the economic and social life of the bustling *kothi*, while also helping my grandmother carry out her elaborate schedule of religious and ritual activities. My father was austere and self-disciplined, socially strict and a person of few words. My mother, by comparison, was easily accessible, with a liberal social outlook. She was educated at home by lady tutors, including a British lady, which reflected the family ethos that a well-known and progressive lawyer of Allahabad would be expected to have. My maternal grandfather had 'informal contacts and friendship' with the nationally known Motilal Nehru and K. N. Katju families. My mother was by

temperament generous, sensitive and articulate, but also socially choosy and hard to please.

The *kothi*, at the time of my birth during the mid-thirties, had a traditional, caste-kin-family-based, traditional-family core on the inside and a modern, pro-British, social face on the outside. Life inside it was affluent and also caste-class conscious. Reflecting the pre-independence ethos, the *kothi's* outer face was compliant with the ruling British, exploitative towards the peasantry and apprehensive of the gathering Indian freedom movement. However, by the mid-forties, my well-educated father, uncles and aunts were increasingly receptive to the nationalist sentiment.

The 'inner women's' and the 'outer men's' (or the *zanana* and *mardana*) quarters of the *kothi* presented two different yet interdependent social worlds. While my orthodox grandmother controlled life in the first, my grandfather was in charge of the second. All aspects of our daily family life inside the *kothi* were supervised by grandmother, and it was she who managed all the major family rites, the customary celebrations and the religious ceremonies; in all this, grandmother strictly observed the purity-pollution rules, particularly when it came to the (only vegetarian) cooking, eating and food-handling activities inside the residence. My grandfather's occasional meat-cooking and eating was barely tolerated. It all had to be run by the servants, outside the family quarters. But meat-eating was prohibited for grandfather during all major religious observances.

The gender separation, achieved with complicated *purdah* practices, secured maximum social seclusion and protection to the young unmarried, married and pregnant women of the family. The daily bathing, worship, food-handling and eating, and social behaviours of these women were very closely supervised by the older women. The privacy and *purdah* in the latrine and bathroom areas was secured for all family members with the help of *kothi's* most trusted servants, who manned the two prized hand pumps in the inner family courtyard.

While caste ranks mattered while hiring domestic servants, my grandfather's office staff, clerks and servants came from all kinds of different castes and communities. They were recruited on the basis of their educational qualifications and the recommendations they came with. My grandfather's main interest was to protect and further all vital economic, official, political and administrative interests of both the estate and his residence, the *kothi*. He kept a close watch on all his confidants. Those caught were promptly and severely punished, and if they repeated offence they were fired. However, as my mother would later on recall, the lowest and the poorest of the workers were most often the least protected. In other words, they were treated more roughly than the others. And sometimes, even the most blatant atrocities went unnoticed, producing deep resentments and simmering personal enmities among the servants.

The *kothi*'s family quarters buzzed with a complex and demanding day-to-day social life. A retinue of servants attended the family members round the clock. Of all the aspects of the family's everyday engagements, it was the daily worship, and the cooking and eating of food that took up most of the time that the family women had. Several Brahmin cooks, male and female (called *maharaj* and *maharajin*), carefully cooked and served large quantities and varieties of ritually pure foods. They manned the cooking-serving quarters every morning and evening, helped by several of the 'water-carrier' (known as the *kahar*) servants, male and female, until everyone had eaten, from the highest gods to the lowest servants, family pets and dogs. The daily serving of meals followed an established

line of precedence based on age, kinship and gender (with children free to eat with anyone anytime).

But, paradoxically, such ritual orthodoxy rendered the sweepers, ritually the lowest, socially the most indispensable group of people. A batch of sweepers was daily employed with distinct rules, roles and services (called *bhangi, bhangin, mehtar* and *jamadar*). They had to announce loudly their daily arrival into and departure from the family quarters, and had to perform satisfactorily their daily sanitary services, while also avoiding any unintentional ritual pollution. Periodically, a whole crew of sweepers, male and female (*bhangi* and *bhangin*), would come to wash and sweep thoroughly all the latrine cubicles and enclosures using the disinfectant phenol. In return, on occasions of ritual, the sweepers would get ceremonial gifts of clothing, food and small sums of money. If dissatisfied, they would loudly complain and make special demands until those were met.

Placed at a very different position on the purity-pollution hierarchy were the cows and their sheds. Under grandmother's watch, all the cows and calves of the *kothi* were meticulously looked after by the domestic servants. Special cow worship took place several times a year, and a special cleaning of the place was ordered on all such occasions. Leaving one's cows and calves hungry, ailing or dirty was to incur a great sin (*mahapapa*). Even the low-caste servants knew this well. To be in a position to have pure cow milk and ghee every day was considered the greatest boon to a family's collective health and happiness. All other family animal and pet care stood next to the cows', including that of the horses (meant for pulling carriages and coaches), birds and dogs.

The *kothi*'s hospitality also followed the 'inner' and 'outer' social divisions, with caste ranks and religion, once again, determining who comprised 'us' and who did not. Only close family members, kin and permissible caste members could eat and share cooked food within the living quarters of the *kothi*, while its 'outer quarters' were much more open. During the large and open formal occasions, 'All guests were welcome with open arms, whether a respectable Muslim, a major British official, a known politician, or a lowly scribe.' Printed invitation cards (with RSVP) would be sent. An abundantly polite 'Lakhnavi' (that is, Lucknow's 'you first' or the *pahle aap* Nawabi) social etiquette was necessary on such occasions. Still, it was mandatorily and neatly ensured that all the Muslims and British guests were served meals and drinks in only the 'set-apart' plates, cups, glasses and cutlery. And this was an open secret to the guests as well.

On such formal and lavish occasions, especially if a major British officer was being accorded a reception, the *kothi* would be lit, decorated and attired at its best. Only famous Lucknow chefs would be hired to prepare the special non-vegetarian and vegetarian dishes and other culinary delicacies in a way that impressed the 'honoured visitors' as much as the sponsoring host. For my grandfather, such occasions were a means of displaying his considerable clout and power to the many local and district functionaries in the government administration.

However, with the sudden death of my grandfather in 1942, when I was six, the family plunged rather quickly into hard times. The *kothi's* economic foundations were shaken. The first visible sign of this was the renting out of the sixteen servants' quarters to outside tenants. Next, the retinue of domestic servants was drastically cut. Even in such times, my grandmother exercised her orthodox viewpoint by disallowing, for example, any untouchable renters. However, around the time after M. K. Gandhi's assassination in January 1948, my father had rebelled against her. He let out quarters to

two Pasi families, resisting the servicing-caste tenants' revolt. My elder brother and I used to watch the loud quarrels that ensued, understanding little more than that an unusually furious social commotion had broken out.

As a compromise, the two Pasi families were shifted to the two smallest and 'farthest' quarters (*sire ki kothari*), in a bid to create empty space between the Pasis and all the 'clean castes'. But soon after that, another crisis broke out. An old man in a Pasi household died and his cremation had to be put on hold until the arrival of appropriate kin from a nearby village. All the cooking and eating in the *kothi* lay suspended as a result. Fortunately, my father's new, liberalized rental policy survived this challenge as well.

Then, the *kothi*'s family members began to die or disperse. With most of the servants, tenants and distant relatives gone, the *kothi* was almost empty. We, the family core, were also advised to move out. But my grandmother refused, saying, 'I will stay here, come death or not.' During the early months of 1948, a plague swept through the town; it claimed my grandmother that March. After her cremation ceremony, my father too went down with plague but he, fortunately, recovered. My elder brother moved to Lucknow that July for his college education. I moved there too for the same reason in the summer of 1951.

II

By 1958, our parents too had shifted to Lucknow and we lived in a very small rented flat. Our parents, nevertheless, still clung on to their 'traditional' ways of everyday worship, cooking and eating. But differences too had crept in. Our drawing/living room, for instance, was now open to our Muslim and Dalit friends, and to any other friends and guests that we happened to have, irrespective of the community they belonged to. No separate serving utensils were used anymore. My mother had instigated these changes, arguing that her children must adjust with the times. Ironically, our rented flat in Lucknow at the time was hardly any larger than the two 'servant quarters' of the *kothi*, eliciting my mother's rather dry comment: 'We now live in the space that our servants used to occupy at the *kothi*.'

My intermediate college and university education (from 1951 to 1957) in Lucknow was, thus, distinctly liberating in terms of the social room I had. The *kothi's* protective bubble had burst and I was exposed in Lucknow to very diverse classmates, drawn from diverse caste, religious, regional, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They were my introduction to Indian diversity, following which my social education picked up pace. I learnt, for example, of the many ways in which an individual in practice tried to socially minimize (or even cleverly cover up) one's overly parochial local caste and religious antecedents. And to do so was also to become 'modern', for it led to learning how to make some good friends, tackle competitive peers and impress one's teachers and superiors.

Lucknow, known for its distinctly inclusive Hindu-Muslim culture and elegant social etiquette, had played its own distinct role in forging the modernity of my generation. It was socially accommodating, formally modern and liberal, and yet not devoid of pragmatic caste politics. By 1957, around the time I started my first college teaching job, I could understand the merits and necessities of both sets of social attitudes. And that is how it was for most individuals at Lucknow

University. As its faculty and students formally inculcated a tolerant and modern social ethos, the same institution's all-important caste politics was not lost on anyone. The 'university politics' in hiring, promotions and firing, along with the contending modern left and right political ideologies, kept abuzz the city's fashionable Hazratganj coffee houses.

Though the *kothi*'s social life was now embarrassingly of a bygone era, Lucknow's practiced, pragmatic 'modernity' was also far from perfect. Somehow, 'caste experience' was integral to both.

My first college teaching job in anthropology pointedly illustrated to me the value of pragmatic caste politics. My college was an institution started and run by the Kanyakubja Brahmins. And on my very first day, I was categorically made aware of the fact (without saying so in words) that I was a Kayastha, and not a Brahmin. The dominant Brahmin—Baniya politics of Lucknow and the rest of Uttar Pradesh was paramount here as well. Even so, the educational system offered enough room wherein individual educational qualifications could be recognized, and the research aspirations and merit of both teachers and students could find expression.

In 1958, I decided to study the Kanyakubja Brahmins of Lucknow. But the decision carried with it unknown hurdles and difficulties. Although the educated Brahmins who moved around in the college circles were easily accessible, the same were far less reachable at home, especially if one wanted to study or interview them. These Brahmins prided themselves in being at the top of all other Hindu caste groups in north India; the pride also came from the fact that the most orthodox of these Brahmins were also some of the highest achievers in the modern age. This group would repeatedly test my 'sincerity and commitment to research'. Once in 1958, the famous editor of the Hindi periodical, *Kanyakubja*, had pointedly refused to see me, a non-Brahman, during early morning hours. For him, this was not the time 'to meet [non-Brahmin] others'. However, in 1972, the same editor (after reviewing in English in his periodical my 1970 book, *The Changing Brahmans*, published by the University of Chicago Press) had gone on to reappraise me, saying, 'You must have been a Brahmin in your last birth!'

I had, on the other hand, the support of the college principal and I was able to house the anthropology department of the college in a newly built large room, with several glass windows on its two sides. The windows on one side faced a huge, open drain (*nallah*), and one could also see the sweepers' neighbourhood (*bhangi bastt*) that was lined alongside. Initially, this was a 'noisy nuisance' to us in the room. But with time the settlement slowly began to attract my curiosity.

Although I do not know now (in 2008) the fate of this Dalit shanty, I still have vivid memories of the community's morning life as it was during 1961–62. Since I taught the morning shift at college, beginning at 6: 30, I would see the quarrelling sweeper couples when they were at their loudest. Pressed for time, they would awaken hurriedly their grown children to send them, within minutes of waking up, on their daily night-soil collecting rounds (in Hindi, the *kamai* or the 'earning' rounds). Soon after, the crying—shouting smaller children would demand from older relatives overnight food leftovers to eat. The others would round up the scattered and squealing pigs and piglets.

These drain-lining huts bore ample signs of year-round suffering and of how neglected they were by the rest of the city. During the rains, the dwellings flooded; in the winters, they were covered with thick, cold fog and acrid, black smoke, with shivering children darting from one shanty to another.

The scorching, hot summers rendered the same mud and rusted tin or plastic-covered shanties unbearable, sending both the old and the young to a large, shady tree in the next low-caste neighbourhood.

Although the sweepers' neighbourhood reminded me, once in a while, of my mother's early advice (that is, 'treat everyone well in life; *all* are the same, human beings'), the sweepers remained for the most part a social curiosity for me at the time. I was, frankly, far too absorbed trying to advance my career and carry out my study on the Kanyakubja Brahmin caste politics at college.

III

I entered America with a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Chicago, during the 1963–64 session. On arrival, I began learning more about my caste surname. In Maharashtra, Khares were Brahmins, not Kayasthas; an Indian caller in Chicago was so disappointed with my response that he had banged the phone. The blanket issue, the Indian 'caste mind' (see note 1), still instantaneously brings down hard social curtains among Indians, whether in India or abroad.

I returned to the USA in 1966, this time to teach anthropology at a college in a small town in Wisconsin. In 1966, on arrival, my wife and I went through a period of homesickness, a period that entailed a sort of cultural shock as well. As two upper-caste Indians from U.P., we felt like social misfits. As two newly married vegetarians, without a car and with heavily accented Indian English, we were clearly 'different outsiders' to the local white Americans. Our situation was, in my wife's words at the time, 'similar to what our lowest castes experience in India'.

To this small-town America, so distant even from all the Vietnam-war-related angst, 'a visiting Indian couple from India' was a social novelty. Indians from India were still very few in the region, and the unhyphenated 'Indian American' ethnic group was still hidden decades away in the future. Our 'stranger status' was thus recorded, with a photograph, in the local evening newspaper, along with an occasional gesture of good-hearted American hospitality. Yet, we were simply 'so different' to the local people. Initially, not knowing how to respond, we also sometimes gawked at those gawking at us.

Over time, however, we had found several good, caring friends in the same community. Across the two different cultures, we mutually reached out slowly but surely to one another. Pragmatically, I had made America *my work place*. And it has been so ever since, a relationship acknowledged in some prefaces of my published books. The initial doubts and ambivalence about staying abroad life-long were gradually eased, especially once my wife and I began treating our strong Indian family and cultural roots as an asset and not a hindrance to our life in America. Thankfully, my wife has also been a willing and active partner in maintaining a complementary life in India, decade after decade. We find ourselves to be *inside* both societies, but seldom *without* the compounding challenges posed by the Indian 'caste mind' and the American system of ethic inequalities.[1]

IV

While studying—first, the Kanyakubja Brahmins; and then, caste sociology a la Louis Dumont; and

finally, the north Indian family and food systems (during the seventies)—I was increasingly troubled by the sociologically widely accepted 'top down' view of Indian society and culture. Coincidentally, in late 1973, I read several writings by—as well as on—Dr B. R. Ambedkar (complementing those on Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy). Ambedkar's life, his incisive scholarship, and his commitment to serve the deprived were eye-opening to me, both as an Indian and an anthropologist on India. In the summer of 1974, I visited Lucknow to decide on a community on which I could pursue further field research, and decided to work with the Lucknow untouchables; I had the support of a young Muslim anthropologist researcher, Nadeem Husnain, who is now a full professor of anthropology.

Personally, this decision was challenging. First, socially I had to earn the trust of those who were likely to distrust me at every step. Second, now I had an opportunity to follow my mother's words of wisdom: 'Treat everyone well, we are *all* human beings.' While doing my best, I knew I had to be starkly honest and sincere in my work-ethic and approach towards my 'untouchable' acquaintances and collaborators.

My preparatory trips to India in 1972 and 1974 (during the summer months) proved crucial. During this period, I received valuable insights from my conversations with Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, a distinguished local thinker-writer-leader, and from spending time at his publication house, the Bahujan Samaj Prakashan. A new and different world of Indian thought, suffering and angst had opened up. It was time now to learn from the realities that had been ignored wilfully in the course of the process of 'Sanskritization' by the dominant castes. Given that such differences were steepest when viewed from the lowest rungs of the Indian social ladder, I had a lot of social learning and re-learning in front of me, this time from the Lucknow Dalits, especially the Chamar community.

But my efforts to gain the confidence of urban Dalits in Lucknow (and elsewhere in north India) were prolonged and difficult (from 1976–80). While the anthropologist in me constantly tried to tackle the many barriers as much within me as without, the Dalits had strong reasons to doubt and resist me. After all, I was an upper-caste Hindu and an unknown Indian living abroad for many years.

Fortunately, after initial problems, a few friendly Dalit elders gave me the key to ease me in. I was asked to introduce myself through my extended family in Lucknow and its long social roots. This was something they could independently corroborate. And I was also asked to show the same unconditional and sincere respect to Dalit elders as I did to my own. I was told to be good at *both* listening and hearing what Dalit men and women, and the old and young had to convey. By the early eighties I was treated 'like a son' or a friend or a reliable brother (I was often called *bhai sahib* or *bhaiya*, depending on the age and gender of the speaker).

By the early 1980s, my first round of intensive field-work among the Lucknow Dalits and the related writing were over. During this phase, Sri Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu had been my mentoring anchor, an aspect documented in *The Untouchable as Himself*.[2]

V

The mid-80s was also the period when American social inequalities—race, class and ethnicity—began to increasingly attract my attention, mostly from a comparative sociological perspective.

Further, it was during this time that I studied the works of some outstanding Indian (Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar) and American (Abraham Lincoln, Booker T. Washington) social and political leaders, and it became clear to me that as long as there were race- and caste-based inequalities, social injustices would persist and aggravate conflicts. Much as independent India had been unable to do a great deal for its declared political ideal of abolishing caste, America too was visibly struggling with issues of race and poverty. Thus, in the period between the 1960s and the 80s, both America and India were mired by their respective struggles. During the 1990s, the Indian economic liberalization and the ensuing globalization notwithstanding, the cumulative economic, political and social activism (by Dalits and other lower castes and classes) further strengthened the struggle. The inequalities perpetrated by caste and race were found to be increasingly similar—and linked—in terms of the social consequences for the weak and the poor.

It was around this time that I found in my several Dalit friends, intellectuals and leaders in Lucknow, Delhi and elsewhere in north India an avenue for sustained discussion. In fact, a new phase of 'conversations' took off for me once they and I decided to devote several sessions to discussing the inequalities that 'we' (they and I) had faced in different stages of our lives and the consequent impact that each of us had endured. 1990 onwards, on my annual summer trips to Lucknow, I would seek out a small group of known and willing Dalit figures (thinkers, religious reformers, writers, activist-administrators, lawyer-jurists, and politicians) for such 'extended conversations' spread over several evenings.

Roughly, this was also the period that saw 'untouchables' transforming themselves into 'Dalits' (to trace this change, see Eleanor Zelliot's *From Untouchables to Dalit*, Manohar, 1996). From the 1970s to the 1990s, India was going through, in V. S. Naipaul's words, 'a million mutinies'. The Mandal Commission had reshuffled and remapped the low/lowest caste entitlements in India. And amid the regional, caste-aligned, national politics, the Bahujan Samaj Party had made its entry: the Dalits now had a new reason to be active in electoral politics. The Dalit-issues-based 'conversations' I was partaking of were clearly underscoring how the major stakes were changing, especially in the aftermath of the destruction of the disputed Ayodhya mosque by Hindutva forces on 6 December 1992. The Dalit politicians in U.P. now saw a minority-minority, Dalit-Muslim alliance as a new possibility. The reformist Dalit pamphlets and periodicals were proliferating thick and fast, including some launched by individuals prominently employed in the all-India government services. These leaders, though formally constrained by the nature of their employment, were full of social insights and acute political observations. For the oppressed sections of society, caste exploitation and violence in the villages was getting worse, not better, at the time. In the opinion of the Dalit leaders I was interacting with at the time, the injustices spawned by the Indian caste system were far worse than any manifestation of the American racial inequalities.

Some related, general, social aspects of the time were as follows: While the 'Dalit cause' needed solidarity, the Dalits themselves were woefully divided. This was still their main social curse, one that quickly sapped any Dalit resolve to fight caste injustice. Thus, well-off Dalits still ignored, even exploited rather than supported their own less fortunate community members. The traditional age- and gender-related 'social respect' was also fast disappearing from among an increasingly selfish

younger generation. The social trust between Dalits and upper- and middle-caste Hindus was at its lowest, letting local caste conflicts and caste alliance politics play into the hands of power-grabbing regional and national interests. Thus both tradition and modernity were failing Dalits in insidious ways.

Closely related to these points made above is the life story of a major, modern, Dalit leader based in Lucknow, who I have known since the 1990s. He and I have had long discussions on our 'shared experiences of social inequalities'; each of us has always understood and deeply identified with the circumstances of the other. After two decades of maintaining close ties, I recorded his life story in 1999. The same is related here.

Life of a 'Caste-Levelling' Dalit

Shri Chedi Lal 'Sathi' (widely known as 'Sathi ji', owing to his pen name 'sathi', meaning 'companion') was social and accessible, but an enemy of intolerance in any form. Fortunately, Sathi and I were socially comfortable with each other from the beginning, and so were our families. We repeatedly visited each other's homes, ate together, and even exchanged gifts on ceremonial occasions. Sometimes he came with prepared notes to our summer conversations that covered different issues.

By caste, a *mallah* (or 'boat rower') from U.P., Sathi ji was born 'literally in the dirt' (to use his own words) in 1921 in a small village in eastern U.P. With moist eyes, he would recall: 'I was born to a deserted, courageous woman in a field one afternoon. Unperturbed, my mother had separated my umbilical cord with her *khurpi* (a small grass-cutting iron implement), deposited me in her wicker basket, alongside a pile of fresh cut grass, and returned to her hut to raise me fearlessly.'

His illiterate mother, a life-long domestic servant and daily-wage field labourer, had drilled in him the importance of hard work and ambition as much as personal integrity and humility. After excelling in his education, Sathi ji, on the basis of his professional achievements and exemplary leadership qualities, rose to the position of an advocate of the Lucknow High Court. In addition, he was also a member of the Legislative Council (U.P.), a co-opted member to the Backward Classes (Mandal) Commission (Government of India), and the President of Republican Party (U.P.). Besides being a well-known, Dalit political leader in U.P., and a writer, orator and High Court advocate, he was also an engaging conversationalist.

Sathi addressed large political meetings as effortlessly as he would administrative party meetings, court proceedings, and small interpersonal conversations. His harshest criticism was directed at self-serving politicians and their politics. He bemoaned the puny before the stalwarts he had personally known—from Ambedkar to E. V. Ramaswamy Pariyar and Bhaddant Bodhanand. Yet, the loftiest figure guiding his entire life was his mother. He needed no better guru, he would insist.

His wife was his life-long confidante. While raising the children, she had completed her university education (a rare achievement within her generation of Dalit women), and had gone on to become a writer and publisher. They had built a big house in a prominent, new, Lucknow neighbourhood, which accommodated in Sathi ji's law office a sizeable personal library, a political-party-meeting room,

and a large car garage (turned later on into a television-repair shop run by one of his sons).

One of their daughters—married to an upper-caste Hindu—had settled in the USA. One of their sons had married a Kayastha girl and the couple lived at their Lucknow home. To rude upper-caste adversaries, Sathi ji would retort: 'You have already established with my family that most exclusive "food-daughter" (*roti—beti*) relationship. How could you be superior to me?' He strongly felt that he had led a life of a 'social leveller', forever conscious to be seen demolishing the indefensible caste barriers. And he believed he had succeeded. On the other hand, he was generous with his time and money towards the poor within his community from the neighbouring cities and villages. 'I do not want to forget where I came from,' he would say. As a poet, he was a passionate advocate of 'human brotherhood'. This was for him the spiritual essence of all the major Indic religions.

Yet, as he reached his late seventies, his 'family woes' were mounting. His children, brought up comfortably and all of them university-educated, were 'going their way in our old age'. And with his wife passing away during this period, Sathi ji was a shattered man. 'Now my sons and daughters behave towards me as strangers!' He felt terribly alone and wronged as much by his children as by his political followers.

His greatest social disappointment was that even his inter-caste marrying children were practicing caste inequalities! Whether living in India or the USA, they were 'mimicking upper-caste social ways even while taking on the Western language, its dress, food, and values'. They lacked woefully any commitment to 'the Dalit cause'. 'Why has no one inherited my fire—to serve a greater social cause,' he would lament. Full of personal anguish, on such occasions he had a soul-piercing gaze. It was to me a distinct 'Dalit gaze', one I had encountered repeatedly over the years.

When emotional, Sathi would speak rapid-fire in rustic, rural (*dehati*) Hindi. The same would happen whenever he recalled his mother. In the summer of 2003, Sathi spoke to me: 'I *knew* what hunger and poverty meant. My children never did. My illiterate mother taught me how to earn every penny by hard work, and be frugal and help the needy. She would instantly share a piece of bread in her hand with another hungry person. Though she faced poverty, insult and discrimination all her life, she still saw in every person the same human being. I grew up in such a mother's lap! As a boy, I routinely faced social discrimination, denial, insult and ridicule. Yet I educated myself. During the late thirties, Lal Bahadur Shastri visiting a party office in Lucknow had offered me a job. My life changed. Shastri ji was a gem of a person.'

VI

My structured summer conversations with Dalit leaders and elites had trailed off by 1998. Only with a few, with Sathi ji from Lucknow and Dr Bhagwan Das of New Delhi, did I continue until 2003. One reason for this was personal. Unfortunately, the circumstances of my extended family in Lucknow had changed rather fast. I had lost several of my close family members in quick succession, including my parents and elder brother. Amid grief and loneliness, I had turned to a few of my closest Dalit friends. And they had fully reciprocated. I had never been much of a kin-nurturing person and, with my father and elder brother gone, many bonds were lost forever.

Thankfully though, I had a network of friends in America. By 2000, I had spent more years living

continuously in the USA than I had in India, even if I was to count my childhood years. As I finish this piece of writing, it is evident to me that my narrative on 'experiencing inequalities' would be severely truncated if I left out a mention of my view of the American side. And however I put India and America socially together, caste and race would stand juxtaposed in daily life. This social mixture has been with me for over four decades, although it is true that I have remained mostly confined to my American and Indian academic social bubble. This has often meant not only comparatively studying, observing, experiencing and learning both but also getting observed in the process in both places.

Personally, if I had come to the USA with a caste birth in India, then America with its distinct work ethic taught me to tackle opportunities in life, both owing to and despite the prevailing racism. Overall, caste and race, even today, feed in both nations on the social-moral indifference of the majority. Each majority turns a blind eye to the inequalities and injustices it perpetuates.

Though I have learned most of what I know about race academically, in university classes and seminars, its social reality in everyday life in America is starkly flashed by the skin colour of any given individual. And as both Indians and Americans know, both 'caste birth' and 'skin colour' produce their own highly elaborate, unending human inequalities and suffering. Interestingly, since both instigate people to look at their ancestral roots, racism and casteism are today similarly challenged by the progress of human genetics (particularly its similarities-stressing 'human genome project'). However, as long as actual suffering by exclusion and denigration continues, no new knowledge or theory on race or caste will help. Both inequalities still await that globally inclusive human heart and committed collective action than heretofore.

4

Learning Caste

Banal and Brutal

Balmurli Natrajan

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Growing up as a third-generation immigrant in Mumbai,[1] caste identities were regularly masked or dominated by language-based ethnic identities. Thus, I first learnt that we were *Madrasis* and then that we were *lungivalas*, when the 'sons of the soil' movement erupted in the 1970s demanding that Bombay was for Maharashtrians. Even the vegetable sellers easily recognized our South Indianness (or *Madrasiness*, since *Madrasi* came to stand for all people south of the Vindhyas) as they addressed the women as *mami* and not *behnji*, which was reserved for North Indian women. It was only when my family visited what was referred to as our 'native place' that I heard about Brahmins in the context of Tamil politics and the Dravidian movement, which was characterized at home as an anti-Brahmin movement. In response to the anti-Madrasi movement of the Shiv Sena in the 1970s, my mother was one of many Tamil women who formally took up learning Marathi at the Tamil Sangam. (She went on to become one of the earliest Tamil speakers in Bombay to teach Marathi at the school level.) My guess is that the Sangam, surely, must have been a site for discussions on caste and even conflicts surrounding caste since non-Brahmins too were part of the migration, albeit not in as many numbers as the Brahmins. However, in all these moments, there was no mention of caste in my home. Thus, I only learnt about the efforts of the Tamils to blend in with the ways of Bombay.

My earliest lessons on caste occurred ironically at a time when elaborate attempts were being made by my family and friends to negate its presence and power over our lives. Even in the 1970s, the winds of change had forced many to disavow what was perceived to be 'casteism', at least in public discourse. Indeed, to be called a *jaativaadi* was, and still continues to be, a vicious

accusation. None is exempt from this. Thus, when I hear my maternal grandmother assert every now and then that 'there are only two *jatis* in the world: men and women,'[2] I take her assertion to reveal more about the social pressures on public discourse than any mental or material manifestations of her true thoughts on caste, within which she lives her life, observing all kinds of caste-based taboos. Over time, I understood that the higher one's caste status, the greater the disavowal of caste. Much later, I was to realize that this was very similar to attitudes towards racism in the United States. For, who can afford to disregard the brutality of caste (or race) other than those who do not face its brunt and, further, continue to enjoy its privileges? Accrued over generations, such privileges conferred by an ascriptive system of caste continue to be exploited in contemporary social arrangements.

My earliest glimpse of the brutality of caste was when I was very young. All I remember was my frightened incomprehension when I came across a part of a very old home that we were visiting in interior Tamil Nadu, which housed a different kind of latrine than any I had ever seen—a dry latrine. To my horror, this was still in use by some people in that home, and I even saw a shadowy figure coming to clean it at night. Not surprisingly, I was not encouraged to ask any questions about this practice. Much later, I read about this as a human rights violation, and recently had a chance to meet with the *Safai Karmachari* union in Chennai and learn about their struggles (and my responsibilities) against such an imposed condition of work that exemplifies Paul Farmer's notion of the 'pathologies of power'—the imposition of violence and disease upon particular human bodies by unequal power relations.

Caste, further, does not only operate in the dramatic and brutal ways that we witness with tragic regularity as most recently in Khairlanji, Bhandara district, Maharashtra. In fact, caste could operate in far more ordinary and banal ways. It produces, in a sense, every physical body within its 'field', and dictates the ways in which one comports oneself in the presence of people of clearly 'higher' or 'lower' castes. I refer here to the seemingly endless micro-practices of distinction that constitute caste in everyday life. Coming to a serious caste consciousness was, for me, a long process. It involved, first, the cognition of the game of making distinctions that pervades Indian social life both inside and outside the home. Then, a re-cognition of this game as a game of caste and not simply a ritualistic religious practice or one related to personal hygiene or any other rational claim. Finally, it meant teaching myself to defy caste.

The banality of caste is best seen in non-dramatic aspects of everyday life, such as food—the conception of what is food, its production (or more commonly for urban residents, its procurement), preparation, the conviviality or lack thereof that accompanies its consumption, etc. Although food-sharing as a marker of caste is on the decline, largely due to the onset of certain aspects of modernity (factory cafeterias, eating out, etc.), distinctive food practices continue to provide occasions where caste reveals itself. Or, shall we say, food is still a key sire where people perform, produce and reproduce caste?

Intimately shaped by caste, or even constituted by caste, food in the Indic context verily contains a 'surplus of meanings' perhaps like no other cultural setting in this world. In the spirit of the age of disavowing casteism, my mother would earnestly attempt to show 'how far we have come' from following or observing caste rules using the idiom of food. She noted, correctly, that as a vegetarian

and a Brahmin, she tolerated living next door to a fish-eating neighbour who also regularly purchased eggs from the *andavalla* (egg seller) who sold them from door to door. She spoke about her mother who, in contrast, would not allow the egg seller to cast a proverbial shadow upon her, and about her grandmother who would, as family lore has it, not even allow the egg seller to shout on the street lest she heard his voice and would have to bathe all over again to regain purity.[3]

Over the years, such refrains get appropriately embellished to show 'how far we have come'. I have heard many middle-class urban liberals, yuppies and the bourgeoisie deny the existence (or persistence) of caste completely, a position that should not to be confused with systematically opposing caste and casteism. In a society organized around caste and other principles of inequality, 'caste-blind' social vision amounts to at best, a wishful idealism, and at worst an ideological defence of caste-based privileges since the structure of caste remains intact despite its dismissals and disavowals. When pressed to explain their position further, such individuals usually declare that caste exists only in remote, 'backward', rural Indian pockets, with an obligatory reference to Bihar thrown in for good measure. Somehow, caste is not thought of as operating in the kitchens, bedrooms, and boardrooms of urbane city dwellers.

The narrative above for me raises several other questions on the subject of caste. For example, under what conditions does vegetarianism become casteist? In other words, when does it become a practice of exclusion, domination (including cultural domination), stigmatization (or extreme form of degradation) and exploitation? Is the egg seller shunned because he is probably of a 'lower' caste, or because the eggs are eaten by 'lower' castes and hence embody the nature of such caste, or simply because the eggs are not vegetarian? Perhaps, it is a little of all three. However, none of these reasons are self-evident to me. I see people changing their food habits and adapting their diet to new conditions, especially as immigrants to other regions of the country and the world, by rationalizing their beliefs about food. My mother, after all, did allow eggs into her home when she found that many Brahmin families in Bombay in the 1970s force-fed their children this 'protein-filled' food. Nevertheless, it was my father's task to serve the eggs to my sister and me since my mother could not bring herself to do so. We were first given the eggs raw with milk. Later, after much protest about the taste, we were given boiled eggs, (barely) cooked on a special stove using set of utensils kept outside the kitchen (my mother's domain). We ate the eggs on special china crockery that no one else ever used. Not surprisingly, I came to view the egg as not simply an egg; under my mother's semiotic gaze, the egg was transformed into a magical source of impurity, power, and a variety of distinctions.

Vegetarianism of the Brahmin kind, perhaps the Tamil Brahmin kind, which is considered to epitomise cultural ideas of purity, and which sustains caste divisions in society, also seemingly displays aspects of 'practical reason'. My parents easily accepted the modern tyranny of nutrition as all forms of 'tonics' were administered to us children. Some bore names such as *Sharkoferrol*. For some reason, however, such a name—with all its allusions to being a fish-extract product—did not seem to ruffle the conscience of the family. The focus was on giving such tonics or tablets to the young that would enable them to acquire the strength that meat-eating children supposedly had—a fairly common belief in the 1970s among Bombay Brahmins. What could be more practical than surviving the competitiveness of Bombay by building the strength to compete better? Who could also

deny that the large proportion of Brahmin men and women comprising the émigré population of Indians in Euro-American contexts do not engage in radical transgressions of food taboos? Nevertheless, the question of vegetarianism and its relation to casteism retains its importance simply because the popular consciousness among Brahmins in contemporary times regards vegetarianism as a key mark of distinction and cultural superiority over all other castes (with the exception of the Gujarati Jain-influenced *bania* castes who are far more devoutly vegetarian than most Brahmins). Thus, those who wish to portray themselves as liberal non-casteists or even anti-casteists feel compelled to choose the medium of food (by their embrace of non-vegetarianism, for instance) to proclaim their non-allegiance to caste. In addition, those who are already non-vegetarians smugly portray themselves as being already non-casteist, and those who wish to stick to their vegetarianism try their best to dissociate their eating practice from caste, perhaps insisting on a freshly conceived health-related or ethical set of justifications.

Caste is also linked to spatial distance and touch. Another way that I learnt about caste was by participating willy-nilly in games designed to maintain social distance and restrain physical contact between people, between things, and between people and things. This is easily visible in public spaces where different castes live in (and learn to live in) separate neighbourhoods (in villages and small towns), which are demarcated in subtle ways that are recognizable to the residents. We also know that caste distinctions continue to be made at public feasts in villages over the issue of the formation of the *pangats*—the order of sitting and being served—despite the reduction in physical distance between the *pangats*, as observed by Adrian Mayer. In fact, the predominant way of exchanging greetings all over India, the *namaste* with folded palms, serves our caste system perfectly by not requiring people to touch as is normal in most other parts of the world. All this is quite visible in public.

Further, the connection between social distancing and caste is also visible, albeit subtly, in everyday observances within the home. One game known in many households across India, especially among the Brahmin castes, is the '*theetu—madi*' game or the 'impure-pure' game. In this game, every article, action, and relationship is classified as *theetu* or *madi*; there are rules of transformation and the goal is to always 'make *madi*'. Of course, these were not actually viewed as games (much like how capitalism is viewed as the big game in town), but they amount to the kind of socially constructed patterns of play (role-play) that are part of everyday life wherein we 'discover' or are taught the cultural logic of things. My mother therefore always bathed before cooking (somewhat more lax than her mother who would only enter the kitchen after a bath), observed the *theetu* during her periods (now relaxed for the current generations), and always prepared food in ways that followed rules that were true to the *madi* principles. Thus, certain vessels on the table could not touch each other under certain conditions. Each of us ate in our own plates and washed them ourselves (the washing was certainly a good practice that inculcated a sense of responsibility, but it was imposed as a way of not coming in contact with the saliva of others, even one's kin). I certainly enjoyed my first taste of '*jhootha*' when we shared bites out of mangoes with my friends in school who apparently did not observe such rules in their homes! Within a household, caste comes clothed as religious practice when it is sufficiently removed from contact with 'outside' factors (such as people of other castes).

Practices of social distancing such as the above *theetu—madi* game then tend to be viewed as being all about hygiene and not really about caste. This indeed is the main reason given for the practice of bathing right away after a visit to the barbershop taking care to not touch anything, including the curtains of the house.

The game of *madi* not only consecrated the home, but was also rationalized as necessary for performing rituals before the deities displayed prominently on one wall in my mother's kitchen. This was so even when the most regular 'outsider'—the maid or *bai*, a common sight in many middle-class homes in Mumbai—would enter the household every day. Given the compulsions of living in a small 750 sq ft flat, Ramabai, whose caste was only assumed by the family to be different (and lower) than ours,[4] had to come into the kitchen and walk by the shrine in order to wash the utensils. She too quickly learnt the rules of the game. She had to be done with her chores in the kitchen before the daily rituals or *puja* began. Further, Ramabai could only drink her *chai* in a cup and saucer specially set aside for her use (and to be washed by her only). Unlike the rest of us, she did not get a stainless steel tumbler, a fact masked by the refrain that *bais* anyway love to drink from the saucer (pouring out the *chai* to cool, and then sipping noisily)! The question of touch was embedded in the technology of this steel tumbler, which had a special rim to enable punctilious Brahmin elders pour hot beverage into the mouth without touching the tumbler to their lips. This was a fascinating performance for the youngsters who would be mocked for not being able to drink the *thuki* way ('from up') but could only manage the *chipi* way ('from down'). The lesson I learnt from all this was that Ramabai, whatever she did (or did not do), could never be made *madi*. Her *theetu* was some kind of permanent quality that was attached to her body, and this was a given in the game of caste. All the rest of us came to *theetu* or *madi* in temporary ways and could undergo transformations by acting according to the rules.

Then, there was Yeshvant. In the 1970s, my father had helped him get a job, which established a relationship between our family and his that continues to this day. As a mark of gratitude, Yeshvant would visit us every weekend or two, and help out with household chores, including running errands to the market. Over time he became known to everyone in our extended family, and would help on family occasions such as marriages. I was propelled into caste consciousness through an incident that took place during an engagement ceremony. During a ritually auspicious moment, the family elders indicated in subtle ways that Yeshvant, a Dalit, should be asked to do some work outside the house until the ceremony was completed; that is when I stepped up to object. There was an uncomfortable silence when I pointed out the injustice of requiring his physical labour and his symbolic value to show that we were not casteist, yet wishing his invisibility when we practised caste in the guise of religion. From that moment onwards, my presence in the family was a potential source of friction on the question of caste, religion and social inequality. This is a price I have accepted I must pay for viewing the personal as political. It is easy for the upper castes to challenge casteism outside the home, and even be revolutionary about social issues, yet mutely and meekly give in to familial prejudices, or perhaps even reproduce them at home. Ambedkar rings true to my mind when he compared Ranade, the social reformer (he was far short of being any kind of radical), to Tilak, the political radical but social conservative:

> When the social reformer challenges society there is nobody to hail him a martyr. There is nobody even to befriend him. He

> is loathed and shunned. But when the political patriot challenges the Government he has the whole society to support him. He is praised, admired and elevated as the saviour. Who shows more courage—the social reformer who fights alone or the political patriot who fights under the cover of a vast mass of supporters?

Looking back, giving up my *poonal*—the sacred thread which marked my entry at the age of 13 into the twice-born Brahminhood of males—was another event that shaped my caste and gender consciousness. I gave it up at first, whimsically, at the age of 19 when I went to Calcutta to study marine engineering. Staying in the hostel with a group of young men drawn from all parts of India, I experienced my first caste-based teasing when we changed our clothes in full view of each other in the 'kit room' of the hostel. I quickly decided to give up my Brahmin mark of distinction if only to try and 'fit in'. However, my visits back home drew me into long arguments about my not wearing the thread, arguments that were emotionally charged. I compromised many times by agreeing to participate in the ritual held annually to change the thread (although I did not wear it for the rest of the year). It took me a few more years to politically formulate my arguments and totally give up the thread and any ritual associated with it. I have now come to believe that it is impossible to separate the 'cultural' practices of a caste from the practice of casteism. It is casteism that produces marks of caste-hood or caste identity, and not the other way around. Thus, whenever wearing the *poonal* is justified as a cultural practice of group identity ('this is our tradition'), I can only remark that wearing the *poonal* engenders exclusion (casteism and sexism) and then justifies it as distinction (identity). I was not prepared to reproduce such a social practice.

In this sense, caste stokes both difference and hierarchy. While hierarchy operates in the form of brutal social inequalities or, more precisely, as graded inequalities as Ambedkar reminds us, differences appear in banal ways, which are ultimately dangerous and indeed capable of turning evil in the Arendtian sense.[5] The theatre critic Rustom Bharucha captures this best when he points out how we see so much of difference in India that we have become indifferent to difference. It is however precisely in grasping Bharucha's point that we need to be serious about the banality of caste. The caste system operates in a way that allows people to not worry about the details of the difference (exactly how do the Others differ?) but remain convinced about the facts of the difference. I need not know my neighbours' diverse micro-practices of food, worship, matrimony, music, clothes, and such things; I do not need to know the history of their practices and beliefs—a history that would inevitably allow me to see how differences are produced in particular contexts by the practice of casteism, which requires such differences to remain relevant. Instead, all I know is that they are different from us (and perhaps inferior, although I think such a supremacist position is increasingly well-hidden in public discourse). Pierre Bourdieu captures this best in his concept of taste, which he sees as 'an acquired disposition to differentiate and appreciate … [that] ensures recognition without implying knowledge of distinctive features which define it'.[6] Today, caste legitimizes itself by seeking to operate simply as taste, a taste for difference (and as distinction). I say 'legitimize', since I am convinced that caste as taste only barely conceals caste as power. It is this taste for difference that is extended in overtly racialized ways by the forces of Hindutva as it characterizes Muslims in contemporary India and proceeds to dominate and terrorize them. Caste thinking is thus the engine for communalist thinking.

Caste therefore goes beyond differences to operate through prejudice and power. It exists when prejudice is increasingly privatized but erupts in living room discussions for people to 'safely' vent their real feelings. It also erupts in violent and dramatic ways in different parts of India as an expression of the power of the locally dominant caste or a generalized upper caste. Additionally, however (and this point is conveniently forgotten many times), caste also operates through privilege (either direct or indirect structural benefits) when the advantages conferred by one's caste are rationalized as 'merit' or go largely unacknowledged. This point about existing and accrued caste privileges is crucial in the debates over reservations. As I gather bits of my own family history, I have realized, both, the complexity of caste relations as well as the complicity of all in reproducing casteism under the guise of 'privileges of birth' and as 'earned assets' (to extend a term used by Peggy McIntosh in her insightful piece on White privilege in the US). I stress 'all' simply because the aura of invincibility or intellectual ability or entitlement that has accrued to certain upper castes owing to the practice of casteism is also from time to time internalized and reproduced by the lower castes, thus perpetuating the graded inequality of the caste kind; the Khairlanji massacre bears witness to this point. And yet, Brahmins hold a unique responsibility to examine their own privileges, even if it were to be a small land grant given by a non-Brahmin upper caste *zamindar* to one's ancestors 150 years ago in keeping with the caste-based hiring and gift-giving customs of the day. Such a gift remains a privilege despite the fact that the receivers may have worked with tenacity, diligence, intelligence, and even honesty for the next 150 years. Certainly, jobs in India are still overwhelmingly found through personal networks that are suffused with caste considerations and euphemized as family connections (see the recent studies by Ashwini Deshpande and Katherine Newman[7] on caste as social and cultural capital in the job market, that is, as a means of access to networks and knowledge bases).

To come back to food and caste, not because food is the key site of caste battles (housing and jobs are), but because food is one of the most expedient ways to romanticize one's resistance to casteism. To give an example, I have seen some Brahmins make much of their beef-eating in public spaces, holding it up as their great act of transgression, and a symbol of their resistance to caste. Strictly speaking, or at least historically speaking, beef-eating should not even be viewed as a transgression given the historical documentation of beef-eating among Brahmins in ancient times by scholars such as D. N. Jha. Nevertheless, without denying its current symbolic value at least at the individual level, I am always left with a feeling that this practice of beef-eating and its public admission does not undo the facts of Brahmin privilege in any way at all. The true test of defying caste (for the upper castes) has nothing to do with the ability to eat beef or discontinue the use of one's *poonal*, although these may be necessary at times to demonstrate one's commitment to anti-casteism. Instead, a more difficult act of defiance would be to de-class oneself by conscientiously not partaking in caste-based class privileges that continue to confer a cultural (and eventually economic) capital on the 'upper' caste populations in India and abroad. For example, in a liberalizing and privatizing political economy, 'upper' caste and Brahmin old-boys networks have shifted significantly from the realm of the public sector, from governmental bureaucracy and public institutions of education, to private, corporate, professionalized spaces. Brahmins form the backbone of India's corporate world, occupying very

high and middle-level managerial positions of power, wielding in many cases the power to recruit and open doors of opportunity. I know that in certain powerful and wealthy circles, I will be hired because of my caste (and the warm fuzzy feelings it immediately generates in the casteist mind, until the truth about my political position is revealed) whereas my friend will not be considered due to her caste. I have heard it openly being admitted by Brahmin professionals holding high offices in the private sector that they will not hire a Muslim or someone from an obviously lower or Dalit caste. If this is so, then being an anti-casteist upper-caste subject must entail declining the possibilities of taking advantage of such opportunities that may present themselves to an upper-caste person.

Over the years, I have imbibed all sorts of entities that would not be classified as food in my parents' home. But a new problem presents itself now. How does one justify one's preference for vegetarian food (at least sometimes) when one is born a Brahmin but has gone through the deconstruction of caste and food laws by transgressing every taboo, but has then gone on (not come back) to prefer vegetarian food on the grounds of ethics, ecology and health? This is not easy at all. Somewhat more complex is my partner's predicament. Growing up in a Nair meat-eating family, she turned vegetarian upon discovering the truths of the industrial mass production of animals as food in the USA. This was long before she met me, a non-vegetarian, anti-Brahminical Brahmin (as long as casteism exists, how can one's caste wither away?). The irony is that whenever she discloses that she is vegetarian, the silent assumption among many people is that she gave up meat for her Brahmin mate! Eating meat with gusto seems to have become a major mode of displaying one's anti-Brahminism among both Brahmins and Dalits alike. Yet, this act is meaningless if it does not entail the understanding of the ecological, health-related and ethical aspects of food, all of which are also imbricated in the question of caste. However, caste is not the sole determinant of the politics of food. There are ways to be non-Brahminical vegetarian.

Living an inter-caste marriage has alerted me to many of the subtler forms of casteism in our midst, all of which depend on some form or other of a cultivated taste for difference. It is important to note that caste is not a distaste for difference. Only rarely is there a desire to 'convert' the lower-caste Other to become more like one's own kindred (the annihilation of difference, so to say, should not to be mistaken for the Ambedkarite vision of the annihilation of caste). This happens very occasionally, for example, when my partner experiences minor attempts by some family members to Brahminize her so that she can temporarily be passed off on public occasions as 'one of us' for the express purposes of social standing. This is cynicism at its best— camouflage the difference that has erupted within, so as to not lose face, and in this process re-inscribe the same difference in a hierarchical fashion (my difference is better than yours). The taste for difference persists unabashedly. Much more common is the practice of 'making invisible', by either totally ignoring her presence or by disavowing caste as relevant shaper of identities and inequalities.

All these experiences have taught me to be anti-casteist in a caste-conscious manner. This implies that I make the effort to think of caste as a relational reality (caste is about social relations) rather than a substantial reality (caste as a property of a being, or an essence). What caste means and one's own political position vis-à-vis caste can only be worked out through negotiating one's everyday social space, which is suffused with influences of caste, gender and class. When I take my guest's

plate from his hand and wash it along with other dishes in his view and my guest happens to be Dalit, I signal to the discerning eye that this is a significant act and that I am serious about being anti-casteist. Being caste-conscious means that I cannot equate our different caste positions (not so-called cultural difference) when I know Dalits are brutalized simply for being visible. When I shared a room at a conference with a prominent Dalit—Bahujan intellectual, he noticed that I did not wear a *poonal* and hence began a long conversation that did not easily assume 'castelessness'. I am certain that I am keenly observed when I am invited for dinner to the homes of my friends or colleagues who happen to be Dalit or any other caste for that matter, simply because food and commensality is not innocent in the Indian context, in India or abroad. Caste has usually been treated as a public matter and so sharing some of these more private tales hopefully focuses the gaze on the more intimate moments of casteism.

5

Growing Up Brahmin in a Tamil Family in New Delhi

Rama Lakshmi

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Back then, my sister and I shared a little trick by which we could tell if someone was a Tamil Brahmin or not. No, we did not accomplish that by looking for the surnames. Not from rituals either. And definitely not from the Gods they worshipped. We looked for clues in the Tamil language. From the way they spoke it. From the way they pronounced some words.

If you couldn't say the word 'banana' in Tamil the way we did, then you weren't one. Everybody in my family knew this, of course.

In my family, a banana was 'Vazhai Pazham'. The 'zh' was said with a peculiar sound that only exists in the Tamil language in India. If you were not a Brahmin, however, you would say, 'Valai Palam'.

There were other speaking styles that were tell-tale. It was not just the words you used, but the way you would pronounce them, or the way you would use your suffixes.

Your caste, my caste. It was all embedded in our unshared Tamil language.

When we heard someone say 'valai palam' for a banana, my sister and I would smile and exchange a wordless look that meant we had figured them out. We didn't need to say any further. They didn't belong amongst us.

But it wasn't long before I figured something else. I didn't belong there either.

Being born the third and last in the family is not always easy. The role models are already set. I was just expected to follow. An elder sister who sang Carnatic music, who cooked, was obedient, dressed modestly, did not forget the *pottu* on her forehead, didn't ever argue, oiled her hair daily and wore it in plaits. A brother who was deeply spiritual and dutiful. What was there for me to prove but to follow suit?

But it turned out that I was anything but the quiet, obedient follower. I argued, questioned and answered back. I also did not follow the rigid Brahminical rituals at home very well. I took short-

cuts, skipped some tasks when nobody was looking. I constantly asked why things had to be done in a certain way. I never got any answers.

Instead, I was reprimanded for not being an ideal Brahmin daughter. There were no Brahminical '*lakshanam* (markers) in my habits and demeanour, it was said.

There was a running joke in the house throughout my childhood. My grandmother would ask my mother if there was an accidental baby-swap in the maternity ward where I was born. Was there a mix-up between the babies of the 'general' ward (euphemism for upper caste) and the 'harijan' ward (the Gandhian euphemism for lower caste)? Did she bring back a harijan baby home by mistake and leave her Brahmin child behind? And everybody would laugh and the matter would end there.

In fact, whenever I had to be chastised or rebuked for my bad behaviour, the favourite term would be '*Shudrachi*' (from Shudra, the backward castes). When I was a child, I didn't quite understand what it meant. But I could tell that I wasn't being good enough for them when they called me a Shudra.

Gradually, I picked up on words like '*parayachi*' and '*shudrachi*'—terms loaded with caste abuse. And I had earned all these epithets. Obviously these words meant that I didn't belong in their chosen, privileged, anointed world. I was an outcaste in my Brahmin family.

Of course much of it was said in jest, but when you are a child these things hurt. And that's how my earliest understanding of caste got rooted.

The custodian of tradition, of ritual and Brahminical dos and don'ts in the family was my grandmother, who lived with us. She was widowed when she was very young; all her hair had been shaved and she only wore a dull beige saree for the rest of her life. She had raised her two children in intense poverty, single-handedly, and through a life of austerity, sacrifice and sheer willpower.

My childhood was marked by both admiration and fear of her. She was strict, super-orthodox and very set in her ways. She stayed away from onions, garlic and root vegetables. She only ate milk and fruits after dusk. She prayed for almost three hours every morning. She laid the ground rules for Brahminical conduct in the house. And much of the burden of following them fell on the women/girls of the house. Almost everything we—my mother, my sister and I—did was governed by a set of rules that had no rationale beyond my grandmother's Brahminical diktat.

But she was also a loving figure with a huge repository of Hindu mythologies, and was a spellbinding storyteller. She brought the Gods and Goddesses alive for me through her stories every night.

My introduction to both Hinduism and my caste was through my grandmother. She made the former into a delight and the latter into a long, inconvenient, and dreary list of chores for me.

My early experiences of life in a Brahmin family were about following a set of strict codes, rituals and irrational practices.

You could not argue with her about these chores. For everything, she had the magic words '*acharam*', '*madi*' and '*pathu*'. To this day I don't quite understand the meaning of these words, but they were a pivotal part of who we were. It was about being Tamil Brahmins. I am not sure these words can be translated either—either in literal meaning or in their essence. All I know is that such words made vague allusion to notions of what is pure and impure.

If you cooked, your personal space had to be 'pure' all the time. Once my mother and grandmother

bathed, they were not free to move around the 'impure' parts of the house—even though these parts were swept and mopped daily. They kept to the kitchen or the prayer room, which were 'pure'. If somebody in the family touched them by mistake, they were contaminated and would have to bathe all over again. The cooked food was separated from the other stuff in the kitchen. If you touched the dishes and pots that contained cooked food, you had to wash your hands.

There was no reason for any of this. For me, the central part of being Brahmin was that you just accepted certain things blindly without questioning. My father always maintained that Brahminism was about the quest for knowledge and the pursuit of cleanliness. If this was so, then it is unfortunate that there wasn't much learning encouraged. You were rebuked if you asked too many questions. Where was the knowledge?

There was no onion or garlic cooked in the house. These were vegetables that gave birth to impure thoughts, my grandmother told us. There was no egg either. Once, however, my father was ill, and he was allowed to boil an egg in the backyard and eat it. He couldn't bring it into the kitchen. And he had to use a separate bowl to boil the egg.

When guests came, food wasn't automatically served for them. If we were not sure about their caste status, then the guests just had to wait for my grandmother to eat her food before they could be served separately in the living room. I often wondered what connection the guests' food had with the food on my grandmother's plate. But of course, there was no rationale awaiting discovery. Such practices were not to be questioned, because not only was it ill-mannered to argue, but because nobody really had any answers. It was suffocating.

Another similar charade took place when the Dalit woman came into the house to clean the toilet every morning: my grandmother would follow her with a mug of water, which she sprinkled over the spots where the woman had walked. I often wondered as a child what the cleaning woman would have felt if she had turned to look at what my grandmother was doing behind her. Maybe she knew. Maybe she had experienced it in other homes too.

But the full import of it all dawned on me when I fell in love. My older sister's marriage was arranged after horoscopes were matched and all the familiar rituals of 'looking' at a girl and so on had been carried out. But I refused to go for all that and presented my boyfriend to my family. They just assumed that he was a Brahmin. And I had never asked him his caste, so I did not know either. Maybe out of conditioning, I too presumed he was Brahmin.

My father proceeded to fix an auspicious date to meet his parents. For this, we needed to know their family *gotram* (lineage). When my father learnt their *gotram*, there was some unrest in the family. Nobody recognized it as a Brahmin *gotram*. Then the uncomfortable questions followed. Was he not a Brahmin? Did I know about this? Do I still want to proceed with this alliance?

My orthodox grandmother urged me to reconsider.

'Think about it again. I think he has fooled you into thinking he is a Brahmin,' she said in a conspiratorial tone. 'There's still time, you can say no. And get married to some other good Brahmin boy.'

But my parents were actually relieved that someone had liked me enough to marry me. According to them, I wasn't exactly marriage-material in the arranged marriage market of the Iyer Brahmins.

Then came the ultimate twist in the tale.

There was still the bit about relatives. How would my parents hide it from everybody that their son-in-law was not a Brahmin and that he belonged to a caste of silk-weavers? During the wedding ritual, my father quietly slipped out and made my boyfriend wear a ‘sacred thread’ (with the priest chanting some *mantram*) to make sure that he did not make a bare-chested appearance for the ritual.

So the so-called ‘sacred thread’ was negotiable? And not only my father, but even the priests complied to subvert the so-called ‘varna’ order? How did they justify it to themselves? All this was done for the sake of putting up a non-controversial marriage show for relatives?

I always knew that much of the Brahminical practices were inherently irrational, but this proved that it was also about exigency and convenience. That compromises were possible. So it was all really a big hoax.

But I also see an opportunity. If caste is negotiable through some surreptitious short-cuts, then the whole system is weak and can be battled and crushed.

6

Caste and the Sociology of Caste

Surinder S. Jodhka

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In 1983, I joined the University of Poona for a Master's degree in sociology. I had not studied sociology at the undergraduate level. It was also not taught at the college where I had studied for my BA degree. I only had a vague idea of the discipline, derived mostly from an impressionistic understanding of Marxism. My formative thoughts on the subject were that sociology, like Marxism, was a science of society. I had been quite fascinated by Marx at that time though I had not read much of his original writings. My understanding of Marxism had developed primarily from my interaction with leftist activists and friends in Haryana and Punjab where I grew up and studied until I moved to Pune.

While I was fascinated by Marx, I was quite dissatisfied, if not disappointed, by the political wisdom of my leftist friends, who mostly subscribed to what was once known as the 'Official Marxism'. Though many of them were quite knowledgeable on Marxism and Indian politics, the idea of a revolutionary transformation did not seem to gel with the way they treated their respective 'party lines'. They seemed to refer to their 'party programmes' quite like the way the Indian *babu* refers to the rule book.

There was one more source of my dissatisfaction with the 'comrades' of those days. Though I had no sympathies for the Khalistan movement that had begun to consolidate itself in Punjab during the early 1980s, I often found it difficult to subscribe to the position of leftist parties on the emerging political situation in the region. They seemed to speak the same language as the Indian state. Worse still, even those on the 'right' spoke more or less the same language. The Khalistan movement for almost all of them was a handiwork of foreign mercenaries and was being carried out at the behest of global powers (through Pakistan) that wished to divide India and re-colonize the subcontinent. For some of them (without specific party differences) it was a logical outcome of the identity politics of

the Akalis in Punjab. A section of Marxist scholars and political activists also saw a class angle in the growing communalization of the Akalis during the post—Green Revolution period. However, rarely did they point to the obvious manipulative politics of the state. ‘Religious’ and ‘cultural’ were simply reactionary modes of doing politics. For most of them there was no difference between the politics of identity and the politics of communalism. These were both, according to them, ‘anti-national’ and had no place in modern society. They also seemed to have no problem with the brutal force that state agencies were deploying while dealing with such movements. I could never understand the nationalist rhetoric of the left-wing parties!

I was born in a Sikh family. While I never felt uncomfortable with the visible symbols of my faith that I carry, my involvement with religion began to decline as I went out to study. In fact, several of us were fascinated by Marxism because it seemed to be saying what we had learnt from the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. The bed-time stories of Guru Nanak’s journeys that I had heard from my mother had inculcated in me a value for humility and human dignity. Marxism seemed to further the same agenda in the context of the modern day world. Indeed, after I joined the company of my left-wing friends, I often used to argue with my elders at home against their hypocritical attitudes, for not giving priority to what, I argued, were the most important teachings of the Sikh Gurus: human equality and compassion for the poor and the weak.

The left parties’ critique of the Khalistan movement often bordered on a denouncement of the Sikh religion and its values; this made me feel uncomfortable. It disagreed somehow with my ideas of freedom and social justice. Such denouncement of religion, I thought, also condemned all those who believed in higher values of faith and had no negative intentions. Religion had, since the days of Partition in 1947, been a source of strength for my family and community as they struggled to rebuild life in an alien setting, having migrated from western Punjab. Such criticism of religion also carried a shade of arrogance and made the lay believers seem like irrational buffoons, culturally inferior and outdated.

II

I chose sociology partly in the hope of finding answers to some of these tricky questions. While I had grown skeptical of the official left-wing positions on questions of identity and politics, Marx’s theory of history and society continued to fascinate me. Admission to MA in sociology provided me with opportunities to learn more about Marx and Marxism—I had access to academic sources, to various theoretical interpretations of Marx’s thoughts, and to the great variety of paths that people in different parts of the world had charted in their practice of left-wing politics. Marxism also served as the critical standpoint for me with which I approached other theorists. Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Parsons and Merton, all seemed to be debating with the ghost of Karl Marx, as argued famously by Irving Zeitlin in his book *Ideology and Development of Sociological Theory*.

Courses on Indian society were in fact more contentious. It was in these courses that I was first introduced to the academic literature on caste. From G. S. Ghurye to Louis Dumont and M. N. Srinivas, caste seemed to be the only relevant subject to be discussed in these courses on India. However, apart from perhaps Dhananjay Keer’s biography of B. R. Ambedkar that I read for the

course on ‘marginal groups’ within Indian society, it all seemed rather uninspiring.

I also read A. R. Desai’s *Social Background to Indian Nationalism* and D. N. Dhanagare’s *Peasant Movements in India 1920–1950* with much enthusiasm. However, these, I sensed, belonged to the periphery of Indian sociology. The ‘mainstream’ of Indian sociology was focused on the castes and on village societies.

I had known about caste from my childhood days. Even though my family had had to move from western Punjab to the Indian side of Punjab at the time of Partition, the realities of the idea of caste had remained intact. In the late 1960s and 70s, when I was growing up in north-west India, village settlements were clearly divided along caste lines. Untouchability was practised as an accepted norm. The scavenger women who cleaned our toilet and the cattle-shed were never allowed into the interior of the house. They would come for the leftover food and *lassi* (butter milk after the butter is taken out).

I remember Fimmo. Fimmo was an old woman from a Dalit caste, but she was treated differently. She was almost like a part of the family, and we always treated her with respect, addressing her as *tai* (elder aunt). She loved us like an old relative would. She did all kind of odd jobs in the house. But I think she too was not allowed to enter the kitchen. Moreover, she never asked to fetch water for us from the village well. We had a different woman, from the Jhiwar caste to do that job. As a caste group, the Jhiwars were poor but were above the pollution line. As a child, I did not quite understand why, even when the Jhiwar woman did not come, Fimmo could not get water from the village well.

The local Dalits were visibly poor and deprived. Agricultural land was more or less exclusively owned and cultivated by non-Dalit castes. Several Dalits, men and women, worked as labourers on the farms but very few owned any land. Some of them also worked as attached labourers or *sajhis*, for farmers who had substantial holdings. By the early 1970s, the road network connecting our village to the nearby towns had become quite good and buses had begun to ply on these routes. Taking advantage of this, some of the Dalit men began to go out of the village for work. These men also worked as labourers on construction sites within the village and outside.

Status and power were the prerogative of only those in the village who belonged to the land-owning castes, the Jats and the Gujjars, and among them those who owned large plots of land. Some of the Punjabis, as we were locally known, were also landowners. The Punjabis came to the village during the early 1950s. They had all migrated from the Layallpur district of western Punjab. After spending some time in ‘camps’ in different parts of the region, they were allotted houses left behind by the Muslim *Ranghads* who had moved out, to cross the border to Pakistan in the face of impending violence at the time of Partition. Some of the Punjabi families were also allotted agricultural lands in compensation for the lands they had left behind in Pakistan. Although, by the late 1960s, the Punjabis had begun to feel quite comfortable in their new home, they were still called ‘refugees’ and therefore did not enjoy the kind of status enjoyed by the landowning Jats and Gujjars in Haryana or the Jutts of Punjab.

There was also a Punjabi Pandit (Brahmin) living in the village, a rather humble and poor man. Even though the Sikhs and a good number of Punjabi Hindus treated the local Gurudwara as the centre of their religious life, the Pandit too had his place in the life of the migrant Punjabi community.

People called the Pandit to perform death rituals. As kids we were asked by our families to take a plate of food to the Pandit's house whenever there was a *shraddh* of a dead ancestor. While the Sikhs did not call the Pandit for birth and wedding rituals, the Punjabi Hindus did, and almost everyone paid him some money as a ritual gift on all such occasions.

However, no one really looked at the Pandit with any envy. Of the two sons he had, one found a job in the municipal office of the neighbouring town while the other remained unemployed for a long time. He occasionally went out to do some odd jobs but had absolutely no orientation for the kind of work his father did. I do not think the Pandit prepared anyone to succeed him. I remember him as a poor fellow who rarely mattered in the village affairs, or had any say in the issues concerning the village or the community.

In contrast, the Gurudwara was a central place for the Punjabis (including most Punjabi Hindus) where they often got together to discuss contentious issues involving the *biradari*. The village also had two *chaupals*, one of which was located in the centre of the village and the other closer to the locality of the *chamar* (Dalits). Village *Panchayats* were always held in the main *chaupal* located in the centre of the village.

III

The textbook understanding of caste that I acquired from the sociology classrooms of the university or from the writings of scholars like Ghurye and Louis Dumont did not make much sense to me. The sociology of caste seemed like some kind of a Brahminical propaganda, a strategy of hegemony that tried to homogenize the idea of India with clear political objectives. These descriptions of the caste system did not match with my own experience of caste and there was no space in their theories for any considerations of possible regional variations in the manner in which the caste system worked on the ground. So I developed an indifference towards this mainstream sociology of caste. In contrast, the idea of class seemed radical. One could talk about deprivation and inequalities through the Marxist theory of class. Even Weber's qualification of Marx made some sense.

However, Marxist class analysis is not what I chose for research during my MA degree. Encouraged by one of my teachers, D. N. Dhanagare, I decided to do a dissertation on the Sikh identity. During 1984–85, however, talking about identity was not an easy thing to do for a Sikh. Operation Bluestar in June 1984 and the anti-Sikh riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in October–November 1984 made it even more difficult for me to work on a subject like Sikh identity without being viewed suspiciously by my 'secularist' friends. However, I enjoyed the research work immensely and felt good about it. I wanted to continue the work but was actively discouraged by friends and teachers alike. Eventually, I did my Ph.D. on the changing nature of debt dependencies in rural Haryana in the context of the success of the Green Revolution. Although I did discuss caste in a chapter on the social profile of the villages in my study, the core variable of my analysis was class.

After submitting my Ph.D. thesis in 1990, I took up a job at the Centre for Social Studies in Surat. Professor I. P. Desai and Ghanshyam Shah of the Centre for Social Studies had been among the pioneers in analysing the question of caste-based reservation, from a perspective that was very

different from the way I had understood the sociology of caste. While I found their work interesting, it still did not appeal to me enough. Talking too much about caste, I thought, was playing into the hands of the conservatives.

IV

It was around this time that V. P. Singh decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, giving reservations to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), identified on the basis of caste and community. Although a measure of opposition to such a policy was predictable, the nature of the reactions from the student community from different parts of the country was quite surprising. I was shocked to see pictures of some of my friends in newspapers, participating in anti-Mandal agitations. Some of them had been active supporters of left-wing student organizations. I was also shocked by the casteist symbolism of the anti-Mandal agitators. Caste was everywhere!

Interestingly, the so-called official sociology of India also underwent a virtual summersault at this time. All those who used to openly denounce scholars like A. R. Desai for advocating class analysis and ignoring the caste dimension of Indian society began to argue against the use of caste as a source of citing backwardness. Some of them went to the extent of advocating the need for a class framework to analyse the nature of the backwardness in India, and questioned the very idea of caste-based reservations. Strangely enough, it was the left-wing scholars like Arvind Narayan Das who came out in support of the Mandal Commission and articulated a position that put things in a perspective. The anti-Mandal agitation turned out to be an important learning experience for me for it changed, both, my understanding of Indian society and my attitude towards caste.

After working for around nine months in Surat, I left for the University of Hyderabad in April 1991 where I was offered a teaching position in the Department of Sociology. I worked there for over seven years. Hyderabad turned out to be a very different world. By this time, new autonomous Dalit movements had come to consolidate themselves in states like Andhra Pradesh. A new discourse of caste was beginning to acquire an identity of its own, in public life as well as in the academia. My interactions with Dalit friends and students helped me develop a new perspective on the subjects of culture and identity, which I began to use in my academic work on the subjects of agrarian change and the Indian village. However, it was only in 1999, after I had moved to Panjab University, Chandigarh, and during my subsequent stint in Jawaharlal Nehru University that I could begin to engage more systematically with the reality of caste in my research and academic writings.

Let me conclude this piece with a more professional reflection. As I see it, in the discipline of sociology and the study of Indian society, caste will continue to provide us with a creative domain for engagement for quite some time to come. However, my emphasis on its continued importance is not premised on the presumption of an unchanging or persistent backwardness of India. On the contrary, new and creative researches on caste will become possible only when we are prepared to shift from familiar grounds. We will have to recognize the manner in which some of the older structures of caste, such as the *jajmani* system, have disintegrated over the years and the manner in which caste still continues to structure the Indian common sense, our Indianness. We shall have to engage not only with the dynamic realities of the empirical but also reject the old, colonial and Orientalist constructs

of caste that treat it primarily as a religious phenomenon, drawing almost exclusively on *Manusmriti* for explanations. Such traditionalist theories would not take us very far, particularly if we wish to deal with issues of dignity and citizenship in the contemporary and emerging contexts.

7

Ram Ram! Namaste! By Caste?

Amir Ullah Khan

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‘Sir, by caste?’ This is the standard greeting used by polite Indians, mostly in the North, to decide where to place you in the caste hierarchy. You meet someone in any small town or village, exchange a Namaste or a Ram Ram and then ask this ubiquitous question—‘By caste?’ My first exposure to this rather unique practice came when I toured large parts of Rajasthan and U.P. in the late 1980s. This rather harmless question sets the tone, I realized, for the level at which transactions would take place subsequently. However, these crease lines of caste disappear where official work is concerned and the higher officer is indeed the superior. Despite this, knowing the caste your colleague belongs to is important, if only by habit.

In my case, the answer would cause momentary confusion. But a Muslim also belongs to, and is slotted in, some kind of indeterminable caste. My official position ensured I was usually on top of the pile, and I guess this is what usually happens when a non-Hindu is asked for his caste. The official designation takes care of any problems associated with a lowly caste position. It is heartening to note that in most cases, work or relationships at the work place don’t suffer on account of religious or caste hierarchies. This has certainly been true in the urban settings where I have worked.

Caste was, in early childhood and youth, associated with amusing incidents. One close friend, son of very broad-minded parents, would regale us with the advice he would get: ‘Son, we really don’t mind who you get married to, as long as she does not belong to the Scheduled Castes.’ Another friend, with similar broad-mindedness inhered in his parents, was given *carte blanche* in choosing his wife so long as she was not Muslim. On the other hand, a favourite pastime among friends and relatives was to identify one famous Indian Muslim[1] who had a Muslim wife. Or a famous Muslim woman who had a Muslim husband. We looked at film stars, cricketers, academics, journalists and politicians, and could never come up with one good example.

These days, caste matters only when people get married. However, among my friends and acquaintances, there is little they can do if their children decide to marry across caste or even religion. While most of them would not flinch at such an occurrence, there are a few who would be upset. Further, it is in this context of marriage that I have come across caste issues among some Muslims, who otherwise vehemently oppose the concept of social hierarchies. Islam was founded on the principles of egalitarianism and gave equal rights to all groups; therefore, this aspect is surprising. The caste issue among Muslims is a very sub-continental affair, and a number of studies show how this is the cultural capital that most Muslims who converted carried with them to their new dispensations.

My ancestral village is a poor one on the banks of the Yamuna in one of the most backward districts in India. The population is predominantly Muslim with some Scheduled Caste Hindu presence. My mother belonged to the *Shaikh* family, an upper sub-caste among the lowly placed *Pathans*. She married a *Qazi*, a relatively lower caste in the same lowly placed *Pathan* community. I have seen some of her *Shaikh* fraternity snigger at this mismatch even forty years after the deed was done. The entire clan belongs to the *Pathan* group, which is considered inferior to the *Syeds* and only superior to the *Ansaris* and the *Quraishis*. In our village, we have a sub-caste called the *Kashmiris*, who think they are the most exalted among the *Pathans* and would never marry outside their own little group. No one knows why they are referred to as *Kashmiris* as they have no known connection to Kashmir. Except that, perhaps, calling themselves *Kashmiris* might have implied an exalted status centuries ago.

My own marriage to a *Syed* did not cause any heartburn. My in-laws, I guess, were far too worried about other things like my meagre earnings to bother about my status in the caste hierarchy. Ten years on, I am sure they still wonder how their daughter will fend for herself with someone who has quit a nice government job and is not stably employed in the corporate sector with a pensionable job. Caste issues have taken a back seat to more mundane and material concerns. Back in my village in central U.P., there was some anguish about me marrying in Madras, which to a north Indian is a strange place where strange people live.

At the National Academy of Administration, where India’s elite civil service is trained, I came across caste yet again. This time, too, the issue was marriage. Eligible young men and women were up for grabs, and caste-based lists would be made, sometimes by faculty members, to be given out. The marriage market was bustling; dowries had to be negotiated and the deals closed before the training period ended. A match would be considered ideal if a prospective father in-law managed to get a decent officer of the same caste who had been allotted a good state. This was nearly twelve years ago, and on my recent visit to the academy, I was told that not much has changed.

I remember one incident a little over two decades ago when we fell foul of the police, indulging in some rather youthful indiscretions. The inspector was furious and threatened us with dire consequences. It later became obvious that he was not really serious and wanted to let us go after a tough warning. He made a big song and dance about recording our names and addresses in what must have been the police station’s scrap book. While six of us, in a gang of seven, answered his questions in the best Telugu we could muster, the seventh sheepishly told him he did not understand the local

language. So he was asked in the Hyderabadi version of Urdu, 'What is your name?' The answer, 'Shantanu', got our inspector incensed. He just could not swallow the fact that here was a Hindu who did not speak Telugu. Muslims in Hyderabad speak Urdu and some do not understand Telugu. Before Hyderabad was transformed into an IT destination, it was a homogenous town where everyone spoke the local Urdu dialect and some coastal Andhra migrants spoke Telugu. My long-winded explanation, that there were indeed Hindus who were Bengalis and therefore did not speak Telugu, left the inspector confused and unconvinced. We came really close to making him think we were fibbing and should in fact be put behind bars.

However, my closest encounter with the really evil manifestation of caste prejudice came when visiting a grand aunt of a friend of mine who I hadn't realized until then was Brahmin and a superior one at that. The old relative was really nice and hospitable as she chatted with us warmly, after bringing out her best steel cutlery to serve us coffee. The house was modern, the setting really urbane, with lots of imported equipment by way of television and video sets. Somewhere in the conversation that followed, my religious affiliation got revealed. There was no perceptible change in her manner. But when she, with some ceremony, threw out the cup I was drinking in, the seriousness of the matter hit home. This, in Bangalore, soon to be India's technology capital.

It was in Bangalore, again, that I came across one more anachronistic practice reflected in the architecture of certain residences—the little dark room that is constructed a distance away from the main house. This cage-like structure is meant for menstruating women, who are consigned to solitary confinement for a few days every month. Food is served to them in plates kept aside for such impure periods of time. Guests who come asking for them during these days of hormonal discharge are told politely and rather indiscreetly of the accident that has befallen the lady. The concept of the pure and the impure is so entrenched that anything impure must be kept away, and outside the house.

At the workplace, I have always been amused at people's insistence on their last names. Certain people spend entire lifetimes going by their family names—I have known several Sharmas and Kapoors who insisted they be referred to by their last names, and never voluntarily revealed their first names. The upper caste family name does not fetch them any advantage over others in the office space; all it does is perpetuate a peculiar historical pride in belonging to the higher castes. This tradition ensures their first names remain hidden in office files, where ancient documentation had forced the more pliant of us to expand on our initials. Then there are those who, in their attempt to sanskritize their tradition, add surnames that are borrowed from higher castes.

Caste did not seem to matter at all when we went house hunting. Having rented more than six houses in a dozen years spent in Delhi, I have never encountered a difficult situation. There were some landlords who very sheepishly asked if we would have many guests staying over, but I guess this was a secular question given the precarious supply of water in the late nineties in South Delhi. One potential landlord, rather apologetically, requested us not to eat beef. Had he known that beef is a scarce commodity in the capital, available only in select localities where Dalit and Muslim populations are in a majority, he might not have asked the question and would not have lost out on such a wonderful tenant, who did not appreciate this pre-emptive intrusion.

Maids came and went. We always found replacements when we wanted to. My children have been

reared by Telugu, Oriya, Bengali, Punjabi and Bangladeshi maids, all of who spent some good times with us until we moved to new locations. There was never a problem with maids who lived in with us. The only occasion when we lost out on what looked like a good part-timer maid was when she came back the next day after her interview with us to confirm if we were Muslims. She confessed that if she did take up our offer of two hours a day of mopping and washing dishes, she would lose out on another contract where she was treated royally, but had been told that she must not work in Muslim or lower-caste Hindu households.

Again, twenty years ago, even as we were coming out of our colleges and universities, caste-based reservations that really began in Madras in 1921, and were given federal constitutional legitimacy in 1950, came under the scanner. Huge rallies were organized against increasing the scope and spread of reservations. The rallies quickly turned into a higher-caste versus lower-caste slugfest. It was natural and fashionable for impressionable young minds like ours to take up the cause. Some of us, therefore, turned pro-reservationists and organized our own rallies against those opposed to reservations. Much of what happened then in Hyderabad was harmless, but it was the poor policeman whose confusion and consternation was comical. He could never understand why this group of upper-caste boys and girls would argue for increased reservations for the backward castes.

By then there were a number of minority-run institutions in South India that had one hundred per cent reservations for Muslims and Christians, as the case might be, and it was amusing to see these students take out rallies against increasing the reserved quotas from the prevailing 50 per cent cut off. These minority-run institutions were caught in a dilemma—they were, on the one hand, fighting to protect their rights of granting admission only to members of their own community and, on the other, opposing higher quotas for the backward castes in state-run colleges. This same battle is on even today as Muslim leaders are still caught up in the debate over reservations for Muslims in state colleges and in government employment allocations. The Sachar Committee,[2] which has of itself never argued for reservations, is being used in an electorally fragile atmosphere, to make a case for reservations for Muslims. Having made a hue and cry over its under-representation in educational institutions and public sector employment for years, the Muslim population is now confused. Should they accept this sop, which clearly has not worked with the very poor among other communities that were granted reservations? Should they campaign for large-scale secular reforms in the education sector that will benefit all poor students with vouchers, scholarships and loans in a free market? Or should they insist on more licenses to run minority institutions?

8

My Experience with Caste

Eleanor Zelliot

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Since I was so early a historian of the Ambedkar movement, many people ask how I became interested. It begins with my childhood. I was brought up a Quaker, a member of the Society of Friends, a very small but very active group. We were taught to be concerned for all people, and I have vivid memories of my family helping Japanese-American exiles during the World War in which we were fighting Japan and they had to leave the West Coast or be interned (we lived in the Midwest). I was also concerned with the American Negro, and very early on joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which, despite its outdated name, is still a premier institution for Blacks. My college was one of the first to admit Negroes and I vividly remember that as students we tried to integrate a local restaurant that would not admit our fellow students. But as a White woman and being not very good at public demonstrations, I really had no place in the Black movement, except for the company of my individual friends.

I discovered India quite by accident. I was asked to be a Quaker delegate to a youth conference in India. I knew nothing about India, except for the work of Mahatma Gandhi, whose non-violent direct action (*satyagraha*) was very appealing to pacifist Quakers. I went in 1952, when Dr Ambedkar was still alive, but I saw nothing of his influence, only that of Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, whose images were everywhere. When I returned I knew I wanted to study India, but my job and my mother's illness prevented me from starting at the University of Pennsylvania until 1960. It was one of the few places that offered degrees in South Asian Studies. I had little money, so I worked at a Quaker centre three days a week and studied for four! As I studied, I came across Dr Ambedkar's name, usually only in the form of single-sentence references. I was fascinated, and I soon realized that the University had a few of his books and a biography by Dhananjay Keer. When it was time to declare a topic for my thesis, I decided on the Ambedkar movement. The Government of India,

however, was reluctant to give me a visa and it took many months to get permission to start my study. I think W. Norman Brown, the founder of modern South Asia studies in the US, had to plead on my behalf.

When I came to Pune, which was the place my funding agency, the American Institute of Indian Studies, was located, I didn't know how to find any Buddhists or Ambedkar followers. There were few books by Buddhists and few people knew about the movement. Fortunately, a young scholar at Deccan College, D. R. Maheshkar, introduced me to the Buddhist Young Men's Society, and soon I had more contacts than I knew what to do with. S. D. Gaikwad, a professor at Siddharth College, made sure I went to every place in Bombay that had anything to do with Ambedkar's life. K. N. Kadam, a social worker, took me to the Konkan where I visited Mahad and Dapodi and the village of Ambedkar's ancestors. I met Dadasaheb Gaikwad in Nasik and sat in his home reading letters from Ambedkar (now published as Volume 21 in the *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* series nurtured by Vasant Moon) while he dealt with the problems of the people who came to him for advice. M. D. Panchbhai took me around Nagpur and then made sure I met Vasant Moon in Chandra. From there on, I met Vasant Moon, Meenakshi and their family every time I visited India. One of my great joys is that I was able to have Vasant Moon's autobiography published before his death. Gail Omvedt translated it, and Rowman and Littlefield published it in the USA, while Sage published it in India. Another friend from the early days is Sudhir Waghmare of Pune, and I have seen him and his family every time I have visited Pune since 1964.

Sometime during that year and a half of my first visit to India, a small press conference was called to let people know about my work; I have a wonderful photo of a reporter scowling at me because he didn't like my approach to the Ambedkar movement. Later, some highly educated folk, Brahmins, asked whether they could publish my thesis in Marathi; after reading the same, however, they said they did not want to continue. Somehow, I guess, I was too sympathetic, although I tried valiantly to be objective. It is difficult to conceal Ambedkar's greatness. However, I think the standard that brands me 'partisan' is not applied to those who study Gandhi or Bose or Nehru, although most authors of biographies of these figures are very positive about their subjects. During my time in India in the 1960s, I was inundated with requests to meet with a lot of people who knew Ambedkar, from the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to P. K. Atre, the famous writer and journalist; I also met literally hundreds of Ambedkar's followers and visited dozens of villages, towns and colleges. My thesis is filled with information and personal impressions volunteered by people belonging to the high castes as well as those who were followers of Ambedkar. I was the first foreigner to study Ambedkar and that is still remembered by many among his people.

I came back with a great mass of material and it took me a long time to sort it out and write a thesis. My adviser didn't like it; I think he was convinced that I had been too sympathetic. But who could fail to be sympathetic towards the life and work of Ambedkar? Finally, I wrote something that met his approval, more or less, and I was awarded a Ph.D. in 1969. I called my thesis 'Dr Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement', because it was the groundwork done by members of that caste that had made possible Ambedkar's enormous success. This was immediately interpreted by some as that Ambedkar was only a Mahar leader, despite the fact that I had noted in my thesis all the efforts

Ambedkar had made to involve all Indians—all non-Maharashtrians who chose to follow him, all the Chamars and Bhandaris, and the CKPs and Brahmans; together they formed the essence of his movement. I received such a lot of criticism from outsiders that I delayed publishing my work for forty years, although I handed out photocopies to anyone who was interested. When I finally published my thesis, I re-titled it 'Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement'. In between, I published some eighty articles. And when I put together a book of my essays, I called it 'From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement'.

Since I was that rare foreign voice on the Ambedkar movement, I always responded to requests for writing, two of which came even before I came home from my research year! One of those early articles, written for Rajni Kothari, is still in print. I also formed panels on the Ambedkar movement in its various phases at many academic conferences and spoke at dozens of colleges and universities. Two scholars whom had I introduced to Ambedkar have since become very significant, Gary Tartakov on Dalit art and Christopher Queen on Ambedkar Buddhism. I found that while I could not be a voice for the Black movement, I could bring the Ambedkar movement to the academic world in America. I always wished I could do some popular writing on the subject, since Dr Ambedkar is not well known in the West, but I was always too busy with the academic requests.

I have never tried to get another grant with the specific purpose of studying more of the Ambedkar movement, since I was not sure I would get a visa, but I have been to India often for various other reasons such as the study of the *bhakti* saints Cokhamela and Eknath; in this way, I have kept up with many of my 1963–65 acquaintances. I have been a visiting scholar at various universities in India and have been invited to speak on Ambedkar at many conferences across the country. I have also been a guest speaker of the Government of India! I was given charge of groups of students for long periods on four different occasions and many of them became interested in the Ambedkar movement and in Dalit literature. A student of my 1982 group has just returned from the *Diksha Bhumi* in Nagpur, full of inspiration from the fiftieth anniversary of the conversion celebration. Many there sent greetings to me, and some thought I had returned! So rare are westerners who really participate in the life of the Ambedkar movement.

Have I felt discriminated against because of my study of the Ambedkar movement? I suppose I have in rather subtle ways. I am usually supposed to be an anthropologist and my mail often comes addressed to the Anthropology Department. A study of the literature and recorded history on the subject seems to indicate that Dalits do not have a history. And surely this is borne out by the fact that the 12 volumes of subaltern history include only an essay by the Dalit-Bahujan activist scholar Kancha Ilaiah and an article on the Satnamis by anthropologist Saurabh Dube. There is no mention of the movement by the Ambedkarites or any other action by the Untouchables in their struggle for a measure of dignity and rights. The Marxist stress on class rather than caste has come in the way of the subaltern study of any movement that dealt with caste and involved action against the caste system rather than class-based action. This may be changing. Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey have all undertaken studies of various aspects of Ambedkar's teachings and his movement but nothing, as far as I know, has yet been published.

My experience, then, has been about being showered with almost too much appreciation from

people who have been part of the Ambedkar movement and I've had a real sense of pride in making available such knowledge to scholars and students in the West. However, it must also be said that time and again I've had the feeling that a study such as mine is not really considered to be proper history by many historians in the West and at times in India as well. However, I have absolutely no regrets.

9

A Glue Called Caste

Avijit Ghosh

Avijit Ghosh is Senior Assistant Editor at The Times of India. *He earned his Master's degree in Modern Indian History from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.* Bandicoots in the Moonlight *(Penguin, 2008) is his first novel and his non-fiction book*, Cinema Bhojpuri *(Penguin, 2010), has just been published. Born in Agartala, he grew up in different small towns of Bihar and Jharkhand. He is addicted to films, music, cricket and football. Ghosh never misses an opportunity to report from small-town India, which nourishes his mind and soul. Currently, he is working on his second novel.*

When my father Durgadas Ghosh got a second promotion after putting in 30 years of work with the Bihar police and became a deputy superintendent of police, my mother was silently ecstatic as most Indian wives of her generation would be. I was happy too, especially after being told that my pocket allowance, then 50 *paise* per week, would be upped by another 25 *paise*. Not a bad amount in the 1970s when you could watch a movie for about Rs 1.25 in small-town India.

Actually, my feelings were mixed. The promotion also meant a transfer from Ranchi to Arrah. For me, that meant leaving friends behind.

Geographically, Ranchi (now the capital of the new state of Jharkhand) and Arrah are separated by over 350 kilometres. But in social terms, they belonged to different ages. Much before 1974 when we left south Bihar, Ranchi was already a bustling town with several cosmopolitan features. Since the fifties and the sixties, may be even earlier, for the aristocratic Bengalis and *richie-rich* Marwaris of Calcutta, it was the perfect summer getaway. They drove into this erstwhile summer capital of Bihar in gleaming Plymouths, Packards and Desotos. The setting up of the Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) in 1958 attracted thousands of professionals from all over India. Hundreds of Russians, too, lived in its huge residential complex in a swank hostel of their own. The hill town had a cabaret club called Casanova, a huge departmental store called Firayalal's, two English newspapers of its own —*The Sentinel* and *The New Republic*—and at least half a dozen restaurants that served decent Chinese and continental food. Ranchi had everything that the upper middle class Indian was yet to desire and avail of in many parts of India. At the elite Ranchi Club, formed way back in 1886—and that's not a printing error, there was ballroom dancing to the music of Elvis Presley every weekend. A sociologist summed up the true essence of the town in those days: a political satellite of Patna and a cultural satellite of Calcutta.[1]

In social terms, Ranchi was radically different from caste-conscious North Bihar. But the HEC had

already attracted thousands from that area. In due course, in 2002, to be precise, this would cause huge social schisms. But as a 10-year-old boy who went to several missionary schools in Ranchi—Bishop Westcott, Sacred Hearts (actually a girls' school where boys could study till Class III), and St Xavier's—I do not ever recall coming across the word 'caste'. It simply didn't exist. Ranchi, after all, was the heart of the tribal-dominated Chhotanagpur plateau. So the digits of the social divide in these parts were between the *adivasis* and non-*adivasis*. But caste? What was that?

Everything changed the day I joined the Arrah Catholic High School. It was the same month that India conducted its first nuclear test in Pokharan, back in 1974. During the first tiffin break, some classmates crowded around me. I was the only Bengali in the class. One of them asked me, *Kaun jaat ba?* (What's your caste?) Nobody had asked me that question before. And, worse, I didn't know the answer. I felt like a brown-skinned foreigner in an alien land. For someone in his pre-teens, it was a bewildering, befuddling experience.

They were all incredulous. How could someone not know his own caste? Surely, I was either joking or hiding my caste. It wasn't an inquisition, though. Later, I realized that they had asked me the question because that was the most obvious thing to do. It was like saying, 'Hello, how are you?' And, 'What's your name?' Caste was the basis on which social relations were formed. It was the reason why two strangers on a train could feel bound by a common tie. It was the reason why someone could be hated, beaten up, or, even killed. No wonder, it was the first question to ask before you proceeded to form any kind of relationship. *Kaun jaat ba?* During my six years in Arrah, I must have heard that question a hundred times or more.

After asking my name, the second question invariably would be: Ghosh, *matlab?* In other words, my surname didn't explain anything. Usually, the surname indicates your caste, or at least gives an idea of your standing in the social hierarchy. Most people who asked me the question were not aware of the Bengali caste hierarchy—just as I wasn't—and bluntly followed it with a more direct question. Over the years the answer became a kind of a game for me. I would enjoy the questioner's state of desperate curiosity by replying: I don't know. Or, simply say, I am a Bengali.

Coming back to my first day at Arrah Catholic High School, after school was over I went back and asked my father, 'What's my caste?' He told me that a Ghosh is a *kuleen kayastha* (a high-ranked *kayastha*). Interestingly, I am told, though I don't vouch for its veracity, that a Ghosh can also be considered the equivalent of a Yadav or an OBC. That was in the pre-Mandal, pre-OBC-ascendance era. Being a Yadav then, in pre-Laloo Bihar, was hardly a social advantage.

In my circle of friends and acquaintances, it was by all accounts still the pre-Dalit era. In the mid-seventies, I don't recall anybody uttering the word 'Dalit'. *Chamar* and *dusadh* were used often; 'Harijan', sometimes; but 'Dalit', never. That word was perhaps not even born in those parts.

When I went back to school, I volunteered to reveal my caste before being asked a second time. However, this didn't make much of a difference. I soon realized that for my classmates, I had been consigned to a category outside the Hindu caste-fold. My identity wasn't that of a Kayastha (or *lalaji*, as Kayasthas were called in these parts) but that of a Bengali. 'Bengali' was a separate category in itself. The characteristics roughly associated with every Bengali were as follows: very intelligent (which I wasn't), cowardly (which I wasn't either) and very weak (which I physically was).

In hindsight I recall that my friends primarily belonged to the upper castes. They were either Rajputs, Bhumihars, Brahmins or Kayasthas. It wasn't caste but class that sub-consciously made me gravitate towards them. Coming from similar class backgrounds, we lived in similar *mohallas* next to each other. Proximity breeds friendship. We also had similar tastes: cricket, comics, Hindi films. But even within the upper castes, there were distinctions. The Rajput students would always have an extra degree of affinity for each other. And the same went with the Bhumihars. Occasionally, a caste-related abuse would be exchanged but seldom with any great malice. A Rajput would be teased for his 'bull-headedness', and a lalaji (a Kayastha, not to be confused with a Baniya as known elsewhere) as a 'weakling'. It was an upper-caste dominated world. Interestingly, the most brilliant student in our batch was a Baniya by caste. And so was the richest student in our class, who came from a Baniya family that sold tractors, tube-wells and foreign liquor.

Caste invaded and began influencing our lives directly sometime in the late seventies, around the time that Karpoori Thakur, a *nai* (barber) by caste, became the Chief Minister of Bihar for the second time (in June 1977). In order to lessen the stranglehold of the 'forward' castes on the state administration, Thakur introduced reservations for backward castes in the state government in 1977–78—a step that, in hindsight, can be termed as a precursor to the Mandal Commission.

The move caused massive social unrest. A 'forward' versus 'backward' clash engulfed Bihar. The struggle had a huge impact on students. And our class was split down its middle.

One of our teachers, well-meaning but ill-guided, had a big role to play in aggravating the situation. During a weekly class debate, he chose a topic that went approximately as follows: Forward or backward; who's right and who's wrong? Two students—one each from a forward and a backward caste—were chosen to speak on the topic. The debate brought out into the open the ill will that rankled inside: no upper-caste boy clapped for the other side, and vice versa.

For a few weeks, even courtesy exchanges were caste-based. A few weeks later at the class president's election, the voting—for the first time—was totally caste-based. 'We must vote for the R block,' I overheard a student telling another. Both were Rajputs. I voted for an upper caste candidate. He was an old friend.

The classmates about whom I have written so far were day scholars like me. In high school, about 30 per cent of our classmates were hostellers: poor Christian boys who came from different parts of Bihar, who were given free education, food and clothing, and who lived in dormitories. They were our classmates, but we did not interact much with them except in the playing fields. Most of them were below average in studies but excellent in sports. Considering their disadvantaged backgrounds, they had indeed come a long way. But as teenagers back then, we weren't mature enough to appreciate the fact. Today, as I stare at a class photograph taken in 1979 and read out their names, I also realize that most of them were either Dalit Christians or Christian OBCs. And if I were to ask myself why I didn't reach out to them and make friends with them, I find myself answering on the following lines. Despite my new and relentless social conditioning, caste never formed a part of my dominant consciousness. But those boys belonged to a different social class. Subconsciously, I had made friends along class lines. And as everyone knows, in most Indian contexts, caste and class form common overlapping categories.

Caste figured outside the school as well. I recall going to a Rajput neighbour's home along with a friend, who was also a Rajput. When I felt thirsty, I told my friend that I wanted some water. He asked me to keep quiet. When we were outside, he told me that I shouldn't have been drinking water at this home since the family had a Dusadh (Dalit) servant. 'How can you drink water in that kind of home?', he asked me. The incident, however, didn't stop me from drinking water there in future. But that was more because I liked the fact that the neighbour's wife was attractive and could cook a mean mutton curry.

Caste was a factor even among the policemen in my father's office. Being an intelligence officer, my father worked out of home. When the backward-forward caste agitation escalated, it had the effect of dividing the workforce along caste lines. While the policemen never fought like we did in school, their caste loyalties would surface over questions such as who would go out with whom during the tea breaks, and who sympathized with whom when the two sides clashed across the social and political firmaments.

This was also the time when the Naxalite movement was at its peak in the boondocks of the Bhojpur district. Arrah, where we lived, was its headquarters. Two police stations—Sahar and Sandesh—were entirely under the sway of the radical Red. Some policemen working with my father were sons of upper caste landlords against whom much of the Naxal aggression was directed. The Naxalite leadership, too, had upper caste boys who had de-casted themselves and had dedicated their lives to the Red revolution. But an overwhelming majority of its cadre were Harijans. The schism caused by this caste/class divide was reflected in the police network that my father led. Being a leader, he understood that casteism of any sort could be detrimental to the unit's performance. So, he did his best to ensure that these differences were under control. But the truth is that they persisted. Caste was like an invisible coat that gave perspective and direction to any issue in the lives of those who were born and grew up in these parts.

In the 1970s, caste was rampant in Bhojpur. Like the earth, the sky, the air and the water, caste existed as an unquestioned phenomenon. It gave everybody certain stereotypical characteristics on the basis of which people were boxed into categories. But caste also had wheels within wheels—there were fine margins that one had to understand and adjust to if one wished to conduct his daily life in a harmonious way. No journalistic account, no sociologist reader, can explain what caste really is unless one has lived through it. Those six years in Arrah gave me a first-hand insight into this alternate reality. Today, as a journalist, I fall back on those wonder years for clarity and understanding on the subject.

We left Arrah in 1980 and went back to Ranchi where my father had decided to settle down after retirement. By now, a renewed call to carve out a separate Jharkhand state was slowly gaining ground. In college, a new political reality remoulded our social identities. The gap between an *adivasi* and a non-*adivasi* (*diku*, in local terms) was growing. Individually, all of us had *adivasi* friends. But, on a collective level, it became a matter of 'us' and 'them'.

Being in Ranchi meant getting away from the caste cauldron and going back to a relatively cosmopolitan set-up. Although by now, Ranchi's cosmopolitanism was in slow retreat. During my college years in this south Bihar hill town, nobody asked me about my caste. But one could sense an

increasing north-Bihar influence at *paan* shops, street corners and salons.

After I moved to Delhi—I was a post-graduate student at Jawaharlal Nehru University in the mid-Eighties—caste ceased to play any role in my life. That is not to say that JNU was caste-free. In some cases, one could sense it bubbling barely beneath the surface. For a few, caste remained a sound basis for building solid social networks. But being a national university, caste was just one of many identities that mattered, alongside one's regional, linguistic, and religious affiliations. With a strong Red presence on campus, there were many who transcended such affinities.

But when the VP Singh Government announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, caste identities were irrevocably crystallized. Many joined the anti-Mandal movement. I didn't participate in the movement but ideologically supported it. The student organization I was involved with—Free Thinkers— rejected the MCR in toto. Those were younger days. Like many other students, I saw the world through the prism of self-interest. For many of us, the implementation of the MCR simply meant the reduction of general category seats in the civil services. To people like us—who had been brought up on phrases such as *upar mein bhagwan hai, neeche mein IAS hai*—the MCR almost seemed like a conspiracy to snatch our dreams for political gains. The question of the social and political empowerment of those who had been on the margins for centuries never occupied our thoughts. We felt like victims ourselves.

My attitude towards caste began to change as I started travelling as a feature writer into the heartlands of north India from the mid-90s onwards. Owing to to my participant-observer experience in Arrah, I had, both, an overt and covert understanding of caste and the way it operated in rural and small-town settings. What I lacked was empathy for those people who were at the wrong end of the social ladder. Travelling to dustbowl villages and coming face to face with the condition of the impoverished changed all that.

As I toured more and more, I realized that the case for 'merit' was overstated. I discovered a social and political system that had ensured that certain castes remain out of the development loop. What we called merit was actually a culmination of social and economic advantages gathered and handed down over centuries.

During my tours through the heartland of north India over the past 12 years, I noticed how caste remains the basic building block for conducting human relationships in much of rural north India. Be it a case of lovers from different castes slaughtered like pigs with the sanction of the entire village, or the voting in Panchayat and state assembly elections, caste is always the key factor in decision making. Even the younger generation looks at politics and social relations through the prism of caste, supporting those who either represent their social groups or claim to represent their interests.

However, that is not as if to say that the politics of caste is a constant. Over the years, there has been a churning in the hierarchy, especially in Uttar Pradesh. In theory, the ladder stays. But with Dalits emerging as the largest social block under Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party in the nineties, the politics of caste equations in UP has turned topsy-turvy. Who would have thought that a Dalit political party would come up with the slogan '*Tilak, taraju aur talwar, inko maro joote chaar* and flourish? And again, who would have thought that the same Dalit party would go on to woo Brahmins with a slogan such as '*Hathi nahin Ganesh hai, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai*'? And who would

have imagined that a woman Dalit leader would become a potential candidate for Prime Minister? Undeniably, the rural Dalit in north India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, has moved up the ladder of social confidence and political awareness.

When I visited SM Degree College in U.P.'s Chandausi town in 1998, I was hesitant to refer to the Dalit students as Dalits for fear of offending them. But I soon realized that the Dalit caste identity was a badge of honour in western UP. A graduate student told me, 'I can say in front of anybody that I will vote for the Bahujan Samaj Party. Do you know even the *dadas* of his college are Jatavs? We are afraid of nobody. The BSP is the most powerful Dalit political party in India,' he said.[2]

What separated the Dalit youth from those of the same age in other communities was their desire to help their depressed fellow-caste men. In a village named Maraiya, one of the two Dalit boys who had gone to college had taken up the responsibility of passing on his education to five younger boys. I found a certain idealistic streak in these boys that was missing among the teenagers of the other communities.[3]

Then, there is Gundiya Bai Ahirwar, a Dalit woman Sarpanch, who was stopped from hoisting the national flag by the rich Yadavs of her village, Pipra, in Madhya Pradesh's Tikamgarh district. It was an enthralling stand-off as the national flag became a metaphor in a struggle for equal rights. Ahirwar's resistance was successful. The Madhya Pradesh government felicitated her and invited her to hoist the national flag at the Tikamgarh district headquarters the next year.[4]

Then, there is the Dalit beggar in Muzaffarnagar district who works tirelessly as a Gram Pradhan (village headman), an anonymous modern Gandhi. Last year, he bid farewell to alms after becoming the first beggar to be elected as Gram Pradhan in these parts of north India. Now, over a year later, Dharamvir is being hailed as the man who has changed the fortunes of Khai Khedi, a village of 10,000, located 30 km north of Muzaffarnagar town. Under his tenure, the village has witnessed unprecedented infrastructural development.[5]

There's another incident I would like to narrate. Most Dalits in Bhikanpur village, located about 35 km from Delhi, turned out to be huge cricket fans. During a visit in November 2006, I had a conversation with salesman Munesh Pal. He said 'I have just two desires: Mayawati should be back as U.P. chief minister and Sourav Ganguly should be back in the Indian cricket team. Hopefully by March, she will be CM again. And Ganguly will be playing the World Cup for India.'

That afternoon, we shared a curious bonding owing to our common love for the cricketer. Within a fortnight, Ganguly was back in the team. And by May 2007, his Mayawati wish was also fulfilled.

These conversations wouldn't have happened 50 years ago. Undeniably, the Khairlanjis and the Gohanas, too, happen. But far more pervasive today is the new and assertive spirit of the newly empowered. Whereas, in September 2005, in Haryana's Sonepat district, Jats had burnt down a number of Dalit homes, the Gohana incident was set off after Dalits killed a Jat photographer who had teased one of their women. That, in itself, is a sign of social change at work.[6]

I am also aware that much of middle-class urban India is yet to overcome its caste prejudices. A Dalit property dealer in New Delhi once told me that he doesn't want to put up Gautam Buddha's portrait in his office because it will give away his caste. His fear was based on the fact that many middle-class families shied away from buying a flat in the only SC and ST housing society in the area

although it was a well-maintained complex and the rates were far lower.

In sum, I feel India’s caste story, today, is poised at a crossroads; it is akin to the case of the glass that may be equally called half-full or half-empty. One can look at the situation the way one wants to. I choose to look forward with hope.

10

Caste as Experience

Imtiaz Ahmad

Imtiaz Ahmad is a former professor of political sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He obtained an MA from the University of Lucknow and a Ph.D. from the University of Delhi. He has been a visiting professor at a number of foreign universities and academic institutions; consultant to the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rome, and has directed projects for the Ford Foundation and the Aga Khan Foundation. His academic interests include social stratification, communalism and social conflict, social structure of Muslim communities and contemporary developments in Islam in India. His publications include a well-known series of books on Muslim social structure and numerous papers in academic journals.

I cannot remember at what age I developed an awareness of caste, just as I cannot remember when I became conscious and acquired an understanding of it. I can, therefore, only go back to the beginning, to the time when I came to be conscious of the social world around me.

My earliest distinct memory of childhood is of a time when I must have been six or seven years old. At that time, my father was posted as the Superintendent of Jails in Bahraich and we lived on the Jail Line. The families of many of the jail staff, the warders and the workers, lived on the Jail Line, but our closest interaction was with the family of the assistant superintendent who lived adjacent to our bungalow.

At that time I had just started school, my schooling having been considerably delayed because for a long time I would simply refuse to go. Anytime there was a suggestion that I be put in a school, I would say that I was born educated and there was no need for me to go to a school. This was a source of considerable worry for my sister. She feared that I might remain uneducated. Eventually, she persuaded Babuji—everyone called the assistant superintendent that because he was a Kayastha—to get me enrolled in a school. I resisted and cried, but Babuji paid no heed to my tantrums and protests. I was admitted to the Municipal School one kilometre away from the Jail Line.

Since my sister was unsure if I would continue at the school or perhaps because she feared that I might leave the house on the pretext of going to school and then start playing with children on the way, she arranged for Sharda, a warder's son who studied at the same school, to accompany me to school and back. Sharda's parents were Brahmins (this my mother had told me) and when it was close to examination time he used to pick up yellow *kaneer* flowers from the Christian cemetery on the way to school and stop by the Hanuman temple perhaps to pray for success. I would do exactly as Sharda

did: collect yellow flowers, carry them reverentially between two hands and place them at Hanuman's feet and stand in silence with folded hands before proceeding to school.

Around this time, my father was conferred the British honour of Khan Sahib and he decided to hold a feast in response to the persistent demands of his friends and senior colleagues. Roughly 800 to 900 guests were to be invited. Most of them were non-vegetarians, but there were some who were strict vegetarians. Separate arrangements had to be made for the two sets of meals. To prepare the non-vegetarian dishes professional cooks (*nanbals*) were to be brought in from Lucknow, and for the vegetarian dishes my mother asked Sharda's mother and another warder's wife, who too was a Brahmin, to cook at our house.

Preparations for the party started around noon. As I had been playing and running around with other children of the Jail Line all afternoon, I must have been exhausted. I fell asleep and woke up late in the night. I had not had a chance to see the guests, and I started crying at not having eaten dinner. My mother put the food before me but I would not eat, all the time saying that I wanted to eat dinner. I must have meant that I wanted to eat along with the guests and since they had left I had missed the chance of feasting the way I thought I would on that special day. I was difficult to console no matter how hard my mother and other family members tried. At this, perhaps with the idea of diverting my attention, my father proposed that we play cricket. The trick worked and I started playing with my father well past midnight. I held the bat, which was longer than I was tall, in a slanting position. As a result, when my father bowled me a ball it rolled up and crushed my finger. In deep pain I started crying, this time not because I had missed dinner but because I was really hurt. I remember my mother bringing a paste of honey and lime to apply to my finger, but it did not soothe. I cried and cried until I must have dozed off again. I faintly remember my mother asking the two ladies who had helped with the preparation of the vegetarian meal to eat and come back the following morning to clean up.

The following morning was school day, but because of the party the previous night I did not wish to go to school. Sharda came as usual to pick me up, but I threw tantrums and finally was allowed to stay back for the day. This opened for me a window which I would have missed if I had gone to school. My mother had asked the two Brahmin women to eat, but as it turned out only one of them had eaten. Sharda's mother had gone away without eating and this was worrying my mother. I remember my mother asking Sharda's mother, when she came later to clean up the area where the food had been cooked, why she had gone away without eating. She replied that she had gone home and cooked food for herself late in the night. Upon my mother pursuing the point further, Sharda's mother said that she had had to do this as she was a Kanyakubja Brahmin and the other lady was a Saryupari Brahmin. She could not have eaten food which had been touched by a Saryupari Brahmin, though a Saryupari could eat food cooked by her. This is why the other lady had eaten and Sharda's mother had had to go home and cook for herself before going to bed.

There was another incident that stands out in my memories of those days. It relates to Bhinna, the sweeper, who came to our house to clean the toilets and sweep the courtyards and the lawn. He was known to be a drunkard. My cousins, who lived with us in the joint family, decided one day to play a trick on him. My mother had extracted juice from the lime fruits that grew abundantly on the tree in our backyard, poured the extract into a bottle, and placed the bottle on a wall exposed to the sun. She

had apparently forgotten about the bottle and it had been lying there for a long time. Its contents had apparently fermented. My cousins picked up the bottle and offered it to Bhinna, making him believe that it was whisky. Almost as soon as he had gulped down a glass or two of the fermented lime, Bhinna began to go into convulsions. He sighed and rolled on the ground. The medical superintendent had to be called in. After giving him some initial treatment, he had poor Bhinna shifted to the government hospital. He remained there for several days. Of course, my parents were very angry and scolded my cousins for what they had done, but they had not the slightest remorse. For them Bhinna was after all just a sweeper and it didn't hurt their conscience to play a joke on him.

Bhinna resumed duty after being discharged from hospital. At work he was reserved and quieter than before, but he did not express his anger at my cousins in any way. Perhaps he was at times sullen, though not defiant towards anything my cousins asked him to do. There was no way that a person of his standing could express anger at what had been done to him. He could only show his anger and resentment through sullenness and quiet reserve. After a few days even that sullenness disappeared and he was his usual self, picking out cricket balls from difficult places, running errands for us, and escorting us if we wished to go anywhere.

A few years later, my father retired from service and the family moved to Lucknow where we had a house. Ours was a rather large house. It had six rooms, two toilets and a big compound. A Lalbegi woman who had been working for the family for a long time came every morning to remove the night soil, clean the toilets and sweep the compound. Her name was Gulabo. She was short and swarthy but her body was remarkably stout. My cousin had a crush on her. He would often pass close to her on purpose so that his body would touch hers. Once my mother saw him doing this and scolded him harshly. He was asked to take a bath and change clothes as he had become *napak* by touching her, even if it were inadvertently, which it wasn't. Of course, this did not change him. Even afterwards, he continued to indulge in his flirtations, which Gulabo generally ignored.

Gulabo was on the best of terms with my mother and would sit for hours together gossiping with her. Whenever my mother would offer her *pan*, she would wrap her hand with her *dupatta* to receive it. My mother used to drop the *pan* in her hand, making sure that her hand did not touch the Lalbegi woman's hand. A tin container was kept on the cornice outside the toilet. Whenever she felt thirsty or asked for water, my mother or some other member of the family would pour water from a distance into her tin container and she would drink it. Sometimes she would drink water out of her hand. Someone would pour water from a distance on her hand and she would drink it. If she was served tea, which would normally happen in winters, she would lift a broken porcelain cup from the cornice outside the toilet, where it would have been kept for her, and she would drink her tea. On occasions such as marriages, Gulabo's family would come and sit in a corner outside the house and wait until all the guests had eaten and left. They would then be given food in vessels they brought with them. They did not eat the food there, but instead took it with them to eat at home. On sacrificial Eid, Gulabo's family was not given any portion of the meat. They were given the intestines which were kept aside for them. It is possible that some of these forms of discrimination have changed, but there is no evidence to show that they have disappeared.

I could not make sense of these incidents at the time. They only stayed stuck into my memories. It

was only afterwards, when I was doing a Master's degree in Social Anthropology, that I could understand the logic of Sharda's mother's behaviour, the action of my cousins to pick on Bhinna to play their dirty trick, or the fact of Gulabo—who was otherwise so friendly with my mother—being never offered water or tea in the tumblers or cups that we used. My education helped me not only form a clear idea of the distinction between the Kanyakubja and Saryupari Brahmins or why my cousins found Bhinna an easy target for their dangerous joke, but also learn a lot more about caste which came in handy on a later occasion.

I had done my Master's degree in social anthropology from Lucknow University. Prof. D. N. Majumdar, a distinguished anthropologist in his own right, was the grand patriarch of the department. He would decide the fate of the students who passed out each year if they wished to stay on in the academic line. He would put some to work on the numerous projects he had running all the time and there they would continue for years on end in a temporary capacity. Others he would nominate to various universities, where he had contacts, to pursue higher studies. Since I had topped the list of candidates in my class, he was probably kindly disposed towards me. One day he stopped me in the corridor leading to the department and told me to apply for a fellowship at the International Institute of Social Studies at The Hague. This was a windfall for me, but a few days later he suddenly passed away and all his students, including me, whose fate lay in his hands, were stranded without a benefactor. I was particularly distressed as I had no options and did not know what the future held for me.

Professor K. S. Mathur, himself a student of Majumdar and my teacher in the department, was at that time doing a socio-economic survey in Madhya Pradesh for the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi. Probably moved by my predicament, he asked me if I would like to work on his project. The job involved fieldwork in the tribal areas of the state. Not having any option and unhappy at the prospect of taking up government service, which was seen by my family as the traditional route to a settled existence, I simply jumped at the offer. After a couple of days, I was on my way to Chindwara where Prof. Mathur had his camp office. This was the first time I was going to be travelling alone; my family was worried, and I was apprehensive as well. But I felt the risk was well worth taking and decided to commit myself to this opportunity.

Upon arrival in Chindwara, I was told that I'd be working in Patalkot, and after a few days of orientation Professor Mathur took me in the office station wagon to settle me in the field. Patalkot is located some 200 kms north of Chindwara in a valley. One travelled by road up to a point and from there walked down roughly 400 or more stone steps to reach the Gond villages, which was where I was to do my fieldwork. Prof. Mathur and I did the same and after the strenuous climb down reached the village. The village *pradhan* was away at the time, and so we landed up at the house of the schoolteacher who lived in the village though he was actually from Indore. After the initial greetings had been exchanged, Prof. Mathur explained to the schoolteacher, whose name was Shankar Prashad Sharma, why we were there. At this, he inflicted a long lecture on Prof. Mathur the sum and substance of which was that tribal development was alright, but there could be no real improvement until the tribals became good Hindus. In the course of this lecture, he indicated how he had been trying to dissuade the tribals from worshipping local gods and goddesses, and to give up drinking and meat

eating.

Professor Mathur was somewhat intimidated by the Sanskritizing proclivities of *Masterji*. He took me aside and told me that in his estimation it was going to be difficult for me to do any fieldwork in this village. He suggested that we go to another village where my being a Muslim was not going to matter. I told Professor Mathur that I had taken this role of working in that village as a challenge and he need not worry. I would manage *Masterji*. Prof. Mathur was not greatly assured, but seeing my determination he agreed to leave me in the village and set off back for Chindwara. As I stood waving at him, I wondered what the best strategy might be for me to elicit a measure of acceptance from *Masterji* without assailing his 'good' Hindu consciousness.

After Prof. Mathur had left and the two of us, *Masterji* and I, were alone, he sat down and asked me my name. Prof. Mathur had deliberately withheld mentioning my name in his presence as he probably suspected that it would alarm *Masterji*. At any rate, when *Masterji* asked for my name I promptly told him that it was Ganga Prasad Sharma. The moment I had mentioned Ganga Prasad Sharma, *Masterji* wanted to know which Sharma I was. This was easy to answer since I remembered the case of Sharda's mother. Since I'd heard *Masterji* telling Prof. Mathur that he was a Saryupari Brahmin, I had decided to become a Kanyakubja Brahmin. As things turned out, *Masterji* did not stop there. He asked me which Kanyakubja I was and what my *gotra* was. This was not an easy nut to crack, but drawing on my memories of the conversations I had often heard among friends in Lucknow I went on to tell him that I was a Bees Biswa Kanyakubja. The *gotra* question was far harder as I had no knowledge of the Brahmin *gotra* system. I had heard that the Bhardwaj *gotra* was common to many castes, and so I told *Masterji* that I was a Bhardwaj. This worked and from the expression on *Masterji*'s face it looked like I had passed the test. Little did I realize then that all this was going to land me into another troublesome situation.

As night fell and it was time to think of dinner, *Masterji* said: 'You will not eat if I cook a meal. So, why don't you do the cooking?' I could claim no culinary expertise, having never cooked, so I had to devise an answer that would allow me to avoid cooking a meal. I told *Masterji* that while some of the elder members of my family were very strict about these things, I had lived for the most part in the city and therefore did not stick to such rigid rules in inter-dining. He could cook. However, so as to not raise any doubts in his mind, I told him that while he cooked I would go and say the *Gayatri Mantra*. I had heard friends say it and remembered parts of it. Finally, when dinner was ready I took a little water in my hand and moved my hand around the *thall* as I had seen orthodox Hindus do when they sat down to eat.

I was not to stay with *Masterji*. I was to stay with the village *pradhan*. His name was Halku. On his return from the weekly market, where he had been when we'd arrived in the village, he came to fetch me. After eating the meal, I shifted to his house, which was some distance away. Gond villages are dispersed and each Gond family lives in a separate homestead removed from the others. Halku's wife had passed away. His daughter and her *ghar jamai* husband lived with him in the main part of the house. I was supposed to live in the storage room a few feet away from the house. This seemed an excellent arrangement as I would have my autonomy as well as the opportunity to closely interact with the family members. *Masterji* came early the next morning to make sure that I was comfortable; I

was taking a bath at the well. Seeing him, I started chanting Sanskrit *shlokas* that I had memorized when I was doing my bachelor's degree with Sanskrit as an optional. Scarcely could I have foreseen that the little knowledge I had of Sanskrit would one day come in handy to convince a *masterji* of my 'Hindu' and 'Brahmin' credentials.

A week before I was to leave, the village was gearing up to hold the *puja* of Bhimsen, the tribal agricultural god. *Masterji* had instructed me to not attend the celebrations, which were held on top of the hill, but as a fieldworker I was keen to be a part of it. So, contrary to *Masterji's* advice, I went. Every family brings a fowl and a bottle of *mahua* beer as offering to Bhimsen. The fowl is slaughtered and cooked for a feast that is held later. The *mahua* beer is distributed among those present on the occasion. It is considered a serious affront to Bhimsen if someone present on the occasion does not consume the beer and does not partake of the meal. This posed a serious dilemma for me. I had until then never tasted liquor, nor eaten slaughtered fowl—both forbidden in Islam. Finally, my instinct as a fieldworker won over me. I drank the *mahua* beer and ate the sacrificial meal.

The news of my libertine indulgence reached *Masterji* even before I returned from the *puja*. The tribals who had participated in the sacrificial ritual and community feasting had told him, in the most laudatory terms, about my having done what the tribal ways would prescribe; worse, they blamed *Masterji* for unnecessarily wanting to change their ways of life. From what I came to know later, it seems that the tribals had told him that I was a superior Brahmin and yet I had had no objection to any of the tribal customs. I had in fact abided by them. Why was he then making so much of a fuss over the matter? Why was he always badgering them to change their rituals, customs and practices? This must have incensed *Masterji*, prompting him to settle scores with me the moment I returned to the village.

As soon as I had returned to the house of the village headman with whom I was living, *Masterji* appeared at the door. I was still feeling tipsy with all the *mahua* beer I had gulped down, but I managed to utter the customary words of welcome. On seeing me, *Masterji* lashed out. His principal point of complaint was that by the way I had behaved and acted at the *puja* I had undone what he had been trying so assiduously to achieve for so many years, to make 'good' Hindus of the tribals. 'I have been telling them', he started in a voice that did not hide his volcanic anger, 'to become good Hindus. I have been dissuading them from eating meat and drinking alcohol. I have been asking them to worship Hindu gods and goddesses—Shiva and Parvati—and you have undone my efforts by your *kukarm* (bad actions). You say that you are a Brahmin. You are worse than a *mleccha*.' Ironically, *Masterji* was right. I was a *mleccha*.

After this first stint of fieldwork in a tribal area, I was faced with the problem of relocating myself for further studies. Prof. Majumdar was no more and I could not think of anyone else with whom I could associate myself to pursue research. I thought of applying for admission to foreign universities, but the problem was that I did not know many people who could write letters of recommendation for me to apply for admission abroad. After pondering over the matter, I dropped a letter to Prof. M. N. Srinivas, whose name I had heard mentioned by my teachers, asking him if I could pursue further studies with him. Much to my surprise, a few days later I received a postcard asking me to see him. I called his office and obtained an appointment and on the appointed date went over to meet him. Our

meeting was brief. He asked me to do a review article and send it to him. He would decide on the basis of what I wrote. I had read *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* by Meyer Fortes during my MA. days and so decided to review it for Srinivas. I did a long review, commenting extensively on the rich data in the book and indicating in places alternative interpretations of the same. Srinivas must have liked the review article, for a few weeks later I received another postcard from him, this time telling me that I should come and register as a doctorial student. Those were the days of village studies and so I decided to work on the social structure of a Muslim village in UP.

I selected a village some 47 miles from Lucknow, towards Faizabad. It was a predominantly Muslim village and the Khanzade were the dominant caste in the village. Although they were called, or at least called themselves, Khanzade they were actually converts from the Bhalle Sultan Thakurs. At some point during the medieval times, a section of the Bhalle Sultan Thakurs had converted to Islam (I could not, despite my best efforts, figure out the reasons for this conversion). From the genealogies I prepared of the members of the Khanzade families, it was clear that their names until a generation or two ago were heavily Hinduized. I was also told during my fieldwork that the Khanzade had kept up close relations with the Hindu sections until two generations ago, visiting and inviting Hindus on occasions such as marriages and the other rituals of life. These mutual relationships faded out as the Khanzade moved to adopt more Arabicized names, and began practicing the Islamic rituals more ardently. The change was reflected among their women as well, as they switched from wearing saris and *lehngas* to the more orthodox *churidar pyjamas* and *kurtas*. From the names of some of my respondents, their recent Hindu ancestry came through quite clearly. The Khanzade were landowners and wielded considerable political authority in the village.

I had barely moved into the village when I learned that there was going to be a feast a few days later. As a curious fieldworker, I wished to observe the feast and requested the village *pradhan*, whom I had contacted when I'd made up my mind to work in the village, to take me there. I asked several people the reason for the feast, but did not get very clear replies. It was only afterwards that I received an explanation. It seems that the village had experienced a plague epidemic during the summer (I had moved into the village in August, after the rainy season) and a few people had died. Upon arrival in the village I had noticed hand-marks on the doors of the houses, but I had not thought it necessary to probe the matter, thinking that it might be some form of decoration. I subsequently learnt that the people believed the plague to be some kind of a goddess. The hand-marks were to ward off the plague. The village feast was being held to propitiate the goddess. The entire village had contributed towards holding the feast and at least one member from each village household was supposed to attend the feast.

Once the food was ready, one of the village elders directed the first batch of the gathering to seat themselves in a row (*pankti*) so that the food could be served. As soon as the food was placed, I noticed a slight commotion. Some of the people who had sat down together in the row stood up and refused to partake of the food. I tried making frantic inquiries as to what was happening, but the people I directed my queries at chose to remain silent. Later on, by which time my rapport with the villagers had thickened, I was told that the commotion had been about the two groups of religious mendicants in the village—the Bhats and the Faquirs—refusing to sit in the same row while eating.

The *Bhats* went from house to house collecting alms every Thursday. The *Faquirs* were gravediggers and keepers of the village graveyard, for which the villagers gave them a portion of the food grain at harvest time. Whenever an offering (*fatiha*) was held in a household, the food used as offering was given to the *Faquirs*. In the estimation of the villagers, both the Bhats and the Faquirs were religious mendicants but the Faquirs considered themselves superior since, unlike the Bhats, they did not go from house to house collecting alms. Consequently, they had stood up and refused to sit and eat with the *Bhats* in a common row. Finally, the dispute was resolved by the two groups agreeing (at the bidding of the local village elders) to sit some distance apart, and the feast proceeded smoothly.

Around the time I was beginning to wind up my fieldwork, I happened to meet a gentleman at the weekly market in a neighbouring village. His name was Mushtaq Ahmad. He had done his post-graduation from the Aligarh Muslim University and had come to our house in Lucknow several times to meet my brother in one connection or another. He was obviously surprised to see me and asked me what I was doing in the area. I told him that I was doing fieldwork in a village and was would soon be going back. He insisted that I visit his village before I left the area and even fixed a date for when I should go and see him. His village was some ten miles away. I was reluctant to undertake such an arduous journey, especially since his village was not connected by road and no bus went there. Even so, he almost forced me to promise that I would visit his village for a day or two. I came back to the village I was staying in and told my friends about what had happened. They, too, were of the opinion that Mushtaq's village was quite far and that I would have to walk all the way unless I took a bullock-cart, which they would be happy to provide. I did not like the idea of travelling on a bullock-cart and so it was agreed that I would walk. It was arranged that Suleiman, the young son of the lone Barber family in the village, was going to accompany me and bring me back. This was reassuring since I hadn't ever ventured far beyond the village unaccompanied; with Suleiman, I would not have to worry about how to get to Mushtaq's village.

On the appointed day, we set out at around nine o'clock. I was not used to walking long distances. I walked at a leisurely pace and reached Mushtaq's village close to sunset. He was not sure if I would really come, and was obviously happy to see me. After some preliminary conversation, wherein he repeatedly told us how glad he was for the surprise, Mushtaq asked us, Suleiman and me, to refresh ourselves and relax. Soon, tea and snacks were brought in and we started talking. Mushtaq asked me about Suleiman and I told him that he was a Khanzada and had kindly agreed to accompany me, given that I was not quite sure if I could undertake such a long journey all by myself. Matters rested there and our conversation shifted to other subjects—his studies at Aligarh, what he was doing, why he had decided to settle down in the village instead of taking up a job and living in the city, etc. I knew that his father had passed away some years ago. Since he had considerable lands and there was no one else to look after the land, Mushtaq had decided to settle down in the village. He was married with two sons and two daughters.

Around eight o'clock in the evening dinner was served. We all sat down to eat, Suleiman by my side, and we ate in relative silence. After dinner, arrangements were made for us to sleep. I was already quite tired from the long journey and had decided to retire early. I must have slept like a log, but when my eyes opened I noticed Mushtaq pacing up and down on the platform in front of the house.

When I sat up and was fully awake, Mushtaq came and sat beside me and asked me about Suleiman. He wanted to know who he was. It was clear that my explanation the previous night wherein I had told him that Suleiman was the son of a Khanzada family that was quite close to me had not convinced him. As I learnt later, Mushtaq had browbeaten Suleiman and had found out that he was a barber. It had so happened that on the previous night, while eating dinner, Mushtaq had noticed certain things that had convinced him that Suleiman was not a Khanzada; first thing in the morning, Mushtaq had made his inquiries. Suleiman had confessed that he was not a Khanzada, and that he actually belonged to the caste of barbers. Mushtaq was cross with me for having misled him and for having tried to hide the fact that Suleiman was a barber. 'These things,' he told me, 'cannot be hidden as people's castes are written on their faces. One can find out from the way one talks, sits and eats what caste one belongs to.'

I remained silent, listening to Mushtaq and pondering over what I should do to get over the situation that had now so deeply crystallized. Finally, with an air of deep resignation, Mushtaq said, 'Well, nothing can be done now. Get ready for breakfast. After breakfast we shall go to the fields and I will show you around.' Pensively, almost overcome by remorse, I got up from the cot and decided to get ready. I went into the forest, took a bath at the tube-well, changed, and announced that I was ready for breakfast. When breakfast was brought, Suleiman was served separately and I was asked to eat with the other members of the family. We ate in silence. I was too upset to speak much. Mushtaq sensed my discomfiture and did not say much, apart from periodically insisting that I should eat more. When he realized that I would have no more, he asked his servant to wind up. We got up, and Mushtaq proposed the walk to his fields. But this time I told him that I would much rather return as Suleiman had to be back in the village. I had planned on staying two nights with Mushtaq but the incident had upset me greatly, and I'd decided that the best way to get over it was to return. Mushtaq went through the formality of insisting that I should stay on for a couple of days more, but when he realized that I was quite determined he agreed. We set out on the return journey at around eleven o'clock and Mushtaq walked me to the end of his village.

On the way back, Suleiman and I discussed at length what had happened. He was hardly upset. In fact, he told me quite frankly that my idea of passing him off as a Khanzada was wrong. He said he was after all from the barber caste and was aware of his position. He would not have minded being fed separately and asked to sleep outside the house, he said. If he was upset over anything, it was that I had been embarrassed. According to Suleiman, even after Mushtaq had discovered that he was a barber, I should have stayed on and left as originally planned. Little did he realize that I had not left because of the discovery of Suleiman's antecedents. During the course of my fieldwork I had realized that caste was a reality of life in the villages and everyone was well aware of what behaviour to expect from a member of a superior caste and how to act towards a member of an inferior caste. I had decided to leave because the situation had become too embarrassing and if I had stayed any longer my conversations with Mushtaq and my own culpability in matters precious to him would have bothered me. Leaving, then, seemed the best way of escaping that embarrassment.

Caste is not one thing: it is many things. For some, it is, variously, the basis of one's identity, a matter of privilege, a source of pride, or a foundation on which deference can be commanded. For

others, it is a basis of discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation, and a purveyor of a state of powerlessness. Curiously, the caste system— on account of its being so deeply embedded in Indian society—is also an insurance against any consolidation of popular support for an arbitrarily chosen singular identity. As long as caste is alive and kicking, we can be certain that no ideology, whether religious or secular, can sway our people's imagination beyond a brief span of time. Gravitation towards an identity carries the potential for human conflict. In India, caste guarantees that such conflicts are easily dissipated.

11

From History to Anthropology

Reflections on Caste from South India and Vietnam[1]

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The invitation to contribute to this volume prompted me to hunt out some of the dog-eared exercise books in which I had taken fieldwork and archive notes during my earliest stays in southern India. In those distant days before laptops, email and memory sticks, one's painfully handwritten notes were a treasure to be lugged about and fretted over. For fear of losing months of work if my briefcase went astray, I used comically messy carbon paper to duplicate as I wrote, lavishly empurpling myself in the process and producing notes in a lurid shade of violet on topics I still find fascinating to revisit.

In the missionary records, family papers and colonial government files that I combed in search of insights into the logic of religious conversions and other intriguing, identity-related processes, references to *jati, varna*, 'tribe', 'race', and 'community' abounded. Much of what I read focused on the painful manifestations of marginalization, especially among women. I recall both the sympathetic and the prurient terms in which Indian as well as European commentators discussed the celebrated nineteenth-century battles over attempts by high-caste Tamils to prevent the wearing of so-called breast cloths by women of the Nadar caste.

Yet I also encountered expressions of pride in being of a particular 'nation' or 'community', as manifested in the use by self-professed caste spokesmen of such stock phrases as 'we the members of the glorious Nadar race', and 'our Bharathar nation is ancient and honoured'. I recall my fear of being either over-credulous or excessively sceptical in my attempt to read 'against the grain' of those compelling but often wildly contradictory sources in which one person's understanding could seem so much at odds with someone else's convincingly expressed account of what it was to observe or

participate in the intricacies of regional caste life. And I recall just as vividly my fascination at that same variability in the personal and public meanings which people appeared to attach to those deceptively simple terms and identity markers.

In my trawl among those old exercise books I found the notes I had transcribed over 30 years ago in the cellar archive room of the Kerala State Secretariat. My sources were official documents that provided details on such things as the debates waged in the 1890s about the power and influence of the 'foreign Brahmins' in the princely state of Travancore, and petitions from the same period about the correct honorifics to be used by school inspectors in referring to female students of the 'Nair, Tailor, Oilmonger and Chalooper' castes. There were many other items, including records of angry exchanges about the rights of access to Hindu temples and the public roadways that ought to be granted to people referred to by the drafters of these petitions as the 'loyal Pariah subjects of HH the Maharaja'. Such concerns are strikingly evocative of the more modern battles over reservations, caste, Dalit rights and temple entry.

My search for old research memorabilia also produced colour slides of the same early 1970s vintage, taken with a bulky, temperamental camera of the kind a modern research student would regard as a museum artefact. I can still remember the friendly schoolboys who hoisted me onto a precarious seafront balcony so I could gain an unimpeded view of the event recorded in my first ever set of fieldwork photographs. This tumultuous all-day occasion was a huge urban processional festival that had at its centre an ornate golden chariot or *ter* much like those dragged by devotees in South India's spectacular Hindu temple festivals. The sacred image it transported was the Christian Virgin, adorned in splendour and hailed with cries of reverence by a massive crowd on the sandy streets of Thoothukudi.

My new informants called this a Christian caste festival, the most important ritual occasion of the year for the thousands of Tamil-speaking Roman Catholic Parava/Bharathars who took pride in their distinctive identity as a community or caste group. The term used by all was *jati*, and their key reference points, the people said, were the group's longstanding seafaring and trading traditions, and their still-active system of leadership. This focused attention on the potent though often-contested authority of the hereditary notables referred to as caste headmen (*jati talaivar*). As in the great saint-cult festivals celebrated in the predominantly Muslim towns where I did much of my subsequent fieldwork, this festival of the Virgin as Our Lady of Snows was in part an expression of a shared identity on the part of a specific, ethnic 'community'. Yet it was also an occasion of much wider and more inclusive significance, with large numbers of Hindus joining the crowd to receive offerings sanctified by the officiants, and to engage in the key ritual act of *darshan* (grace-conferring sight in the presence of divinity).

Both my smeared but still-legible notebooks and the pictures of people and street scenes that I had taken in Chennai, Thoothukudi, Nakur and Thiruvananthapuram are powerfully evocative of my stays in those localities that were still generally known as Madras, Tuticorin, Nagore and Trivandrum, respectively, in those days. By the time I found myself witnessing that remarkable instance of South Indian 'syncre-tism'—a problematic but still useful term for such interactions and conceptual border-crossings—I was beginning to realize how fulfilling and exciting it was to work with living people.

My hope was to stay alert to the salience of the historical change in everything I was observing, and I still greatly value my original history training. But I knew that I wanted above all to explore the contemporary ethnographic settings in an effort to comprehend these and other practices, most of which seemed significantly at odds with the field's received wisdom concerning the boundaries and fixities of South Asian 'communities'.

Not everyone I knew applauded my decision to embrace Anthropology's concern with the observable here and now, but I was fortunate in having sympathetic friends and mentors both at home and in India who encouraged and inspired me. And of course this was a time when scholars in many countries were finding novel ways to combine historical and anthropological perspectives, thereby transforming established research practices both within and beyond South Asian studies.

India's dramatically changing political environment had a variety of unexpected effects on my forays into 'interdisciplinarity'. When I first went to South India, the idea of asking what, if anything, caste meant to the region's Christians and Muslims, and how its claims and reference points were related to the processes of religious conversion, had seemed worthwhile and challenging. But I also thought of this very much as an academic exercise. The debates that seemed to matter most when I was formulating my research aims were to do with the celebrated sociologist Louis Dumont's provocative arguments about the absence of true caste values among non-Hindus, together with the issues being raised by the historians about the nature and origin of the subcontinent's ethno-religious or 'communal' boundaries. This was the intellectual context in which I was trying to situate my questions about whether caste at the level of either *jati* or *varna* involved enduring the historically rooted traditions of Indian experience, or whether its discursive and practical manifestations were largely 'invented' or fabricated, either by colonial officialdom—as some of my contemporaries were beginning to argue—or by the will and initiative of Indians themselves.

My initial way into these issues was to ask about the apparent persistence of castelike identifications among people who were often spoken of as having been particularly active in resisting, through religious conversion, the deprivations and indignities experienced by those of low-caste birth within the Hindu 'fold'. Indeed there was clearly a wider issue here, to do with the ways in which religion in India can be both equated with caste and portrayed as its antithesis.[2] And as I say, these seemed exciting and legitimate academic questions. What I was not prepared for was the sudden transformation of my research interests into something directly concerned with the most pressing and sensitive public issues of the early Hindutva years. I was doing a supplementary stint of documentary research in the Tamil Nadu state archives on the day a team of journalists turned up asking to see the 'Cambridge woman who knows about conversion'.

It was a shock to someone accustomed to the pleasant anonymity of a junior researcher's daily round. I knew immediately that this was a tricky situation, and definitely the sort of thing a foreigner should be wary about, given the ever-present anxiety about whether one's precious visa would be cancelled or a subsequent one denied. Only days before, the *Indian Express* had broken the now-famous story of the 180 Dalit families in the South Indian village of Meenakshipuram who had allegedly 'shifted their loyalty', as the newspaper put it, in a collective mass conversion to Islam. The journalists had cameras and tape recorders. 'Tell us Madam, what do your studies tell about why

there is conversion here?'

The invitation was tempting. I suppose if I had had the confidence to do so, I would have launched into a didactic little Nehruvian homily about the great Indian tradition of religious tolerance. I would probably have tried to explain my view of this as having been shaped in the South, in studying the region's long history of accommodating 'indigenized' versions of all the major world religions. I might have ended up saying something about the ways in which I thought both low and high caste people had long shown themselves capable of using the converted faiths to form, both, a basis for particularities of ethnic caste identities, as well as a means of interacting in dynamic if not always harmonious ways with those around them.

But of course I did no such thing. I feared, perhaps wrongly, that what was being offered was an invitation to expose myself as an embodiment of the 'foreign hand' that was being so widely spoken of as a hidden force in the alleged subversion of deprived or otherwise vulnerable Indians by the purveyors of insidious 'alien' faiths. So, paranoid or not, I felt compelled to respond in the most drearily anodyne terms I could muster so as to avoid any danger of making sensational copy for the local press.

In recent years, I have been doing research in Vietnam, focusing on the remarkable lives led by women and men from the Hanoi *intelligentsia* families who have been active in the making and unmaking of their homeland's colonial, post-colonial and socialist modernities. This has been a comparative project, focusing on issues that are part of shared public and personal memory, and my experiences of urban life in a second great Asian society have stimulated me to rethink on certain questions that I had tried to address in my earlier work. The older people I have worked with in Hanoi express mixed feelings about India, though it should be said their knowledge of the country is almost exclusively second-hand. They are all well-read individuals and most have extensive experience of overseas work and study, both during and after their country's wars against the French and the US. But almost all these formative experiences took place in China, the USSR and other socialist and quasi-socialist countries, including many leftist African states.

When India has come up in our conversations, my Hanoi friends sometimes question why it was that their great leader Ho Chi Minh gave the name *Le Paria* [sic] to the famous underground anti-colonial news sheet that he founded in 1921 with fellow revolutionaries in Paris. The title was of course intended to express the debasement that imperial rule imposed on all who suffered its subjugations. This was a notable foreshadowing of Frantz Fanon's celebrated use 40 years later of the much-quoted phrase 'wretched of the earth' (*les damnés de la terre*) to make much the same point.

As a result, there are educated Vietnamese for whom India is synonymous with something they think of as a form of enduring social injustice radically unlike anything native to their own society, either in the pre-colonial past, or as reordered by the revolutionary forces that came to power at the end of their long and bloody liberation struggles. Yet, until very recently, one of the major landmarks in central Hanoi was a memorial garden named after Mrs Indira Gandhi, long honoured as an anti-imperialist 'friend' and supporter of Vietnam's anti-US war effort. Like her father Pandit Nehru, she has also been represented in official accounts as an embodiment of progressively egalitarian social values much like those subscribed to by revolutionary Marxists as well as so-called 'soft socialists'

in the former colonial world.

I should add here that for the younger Hanoi people I know, India is something else again: it is neither a land of strange and abhorrent social and communal divisions, nor a fraternal co-upholder of the equality-loving values of, what I have been calling, the worldwide socialist ecumene. It is instead the country that their newspapers regularly bracket with China as one of the thrusting, new, powerhouse economies contending for dominance in a competitive global marketplace, in which Vietnam too is now carving out a significant if precarious foothold. And as in both China and India, and indeed in all the other 'late' or 'post-socialist' states that have done away with their many forms of public welfare provision as well as their five-year plans and sclerotic state-owned enterprises, I have heard my Vietnamese friends voice considerable anxiety about how burgeoning consumerism and the unleashing of their citizens' entrepreneurial energies will affect people of the kind whom Indians sometimes still refer to as the country's 'weaker sections'.

As anyone familiar with the subcontinent will know very well, one of the many critical changes in Indian public life over the last 30 years has been the multi-pronged attacks from both the left and the right on the old-style, high-minded Nehruvian vision of top-down, state-administered, socially beneficial justice as an engine of development that could 'uplift' the circumstances of such people as the Dalits and the Adivasis/'tribals'. In Vietnam's case, there are striking parallels with India's battles over these much-debated, social-justice issues. Here too one can see the reshaping of symbols of socialist universalism into representations of heightened national pride, with a strong emphasis on commerce and enterprise as defining virtues of the country's new life in the current age of marketization (known as *doi moi* or 'renovation' in Vietnam). That former Indira Gandhi garden is now an expensively re-landscaped showcase for a giant statue of one of the country's pre-modern national heroes, Ly Thai To. This semi-legendary medieval emperor is now extolled as the founder of Vietnam's riverine capital, and hence regarded as the prescient provider of commercial opportunities to those of his subjects who had the skill and daring to engage as traders and artisans with the wider maritime world, most notably the ASEAN lands, which are now so important to Vietnam as commercial and investment partners.

Here and there, however, one glimpses traces of an underlying tension about what to do about those who seem to be lagging behind other Vietnamese in this present-day push for growth and national advancement. In the brightly coloured government posters that convey official messages about Vietnamese citizenship and nationhood, representations of the country's 53 named 'national minorities' (the term used in much the same way as in China) profess loving regard for these internal 'others' as cherished contributors to the national narrative of past resistance struggles and present-day marketized modernity.

Yet, these close counterparts of India's Adivasis and Malaysia's *orang asli* communities tend to be poorer and less educated than other Vietnamese. As a result, they are widely seen as worryingly under-equipped to meet the challenges of marketization despite a host of official schemes to benefit or 'elevate' them, often through measures that bear striking similarities to the reservations schemes that are still so much a part of contemporary Indian life. And like the old Nehruvians who bemoan the rise of raucous OBC and Dalit—Bahujan political parties, there are *intelligentsia* critics in Vietnam who

express concerns about some, if not all, of the changes taking place in the new Vietnam, including the pressures being experienced by the 'national minorities'.

It is in India, however, insofar as I can tell from my recent visits, as well as my reading of Indian print media and website content and my interactions with Indian colleagues, that both the everyday language of politics and government and that of ordinary interpersonal communication still make continual use of the vocabulary of caste and ethno-religious 'community' systems. Of course there are undoubtedly just as many cases where public and personal life is conducted without such allusions, whether explicit or implied. It is still striking though when I recall the matrimonial columns that intrigued me 30 years ago in the weekend editions of the Madras and Delhi newspapers to see their high-tech, contemporary counterparts. These are the innumerable match-making Web sites competing for online subscribers in the breezy, ultramodern expression of international advertising, with clickable options for 'caste/sect and family values': 'Find a match from your caste today!' 'Computerized partner search—results guaranteed!' 'Shaadi success: I found my soulmate—you will too!' 'Seeking groom. Age: 22. Height: 5' 3". Caste: Brahmin. Gothra: Bhardwaj. Community: Kannada/Karnataka. Occupation: Student. City: Bangalore.'

As has been widely shown by the leading specialists in the field—including the editors of this volume—these are all exceedingly dynamic forms of expression. A century ago, both in South India and further afield, public allusions to differences in *jati* and *varna* would have been likely to focus on expressions of anxiety or resentment about issues such as the cleanliness of rituals and the exclusion of people then known as the Sudras—the Untouchables—from sensitive ritual spaces. Fifty years ago, a critical component of caste-related public discourse was the issue of collective empowerment and 'uplift'. Such concerns, of course, are still apparent today in the manifestos of a host of regional political parties. It is also striking that so many of today's accounts of modern India's spectacular, consumer economy are expressed in a language that draws essentially from caste-based viewpoints. I have certainly both read and heard a great deal in this vein. What I am referring to are pronouncements pointing to 'the Agarwals', 'the Khatris' or 'the Banias' as the embodiments of the thrusting entrepreneurialism that has ushered in the age of consumerism, a phenomenon that is sometimes applauded and sometimes just as vehemently reviled in discussions of the new 'shining India', with its call centres, shopping malls and vigorous assertions of diasporic 'long-distance nationalism'.

Some of this is no doubt much like the debates in the West on issues such as commercialization and the alleged 'dumbing down' of education and communication in public life. And there is much of interest for anthropologists and historians in the fact that while in Britain such arguments are often visualized through the idiom of class, in the USA, it is the essentialisms of race that are widely spoken of in these terms. These are all forms of language and practice that have become deeply embedded in lived experience. All are flexible, resilient and 'modern'; all, including caste in its many forms and manifestations, have had an enduring capacity to, both, shape and be shaped by people's understandings of the world.

12

An Eventful Journey

From the Real to the Comical

D. Shyam Babu

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When Professor Khare suggested that we do a volume on lived experiences of caste, my excitement at doing something novel was real but short-lived. Be it the reality or a mere colonial construct, caste is pervasive in contemporary India. It lurks in the corridors of power and influences public policy in more ways than most of us would like the case to be. It is godsend for many a columnist bent on diagnosing and offering cures for our collective ills. In this age of Mandal and anti-Mandal, 'the thing' is unavoidable at office and at home. Scholarly works on caste are legion. But few writers care, even in their memoirs, to delve into their real-life experiences of caste. Wherever it finds a mention, it happens to be in passing, for instance, while setting the narrative around the writer's childhood. Then, it disappears. So, compiling the lived experiences of caste by academics and writers, most of who have previously written on the subject as observers, was going to be a great idea, or so we thought. Who knew, our contributors willing, it could even make a substantial difference to our understanding of the subject?

Then, what of me? Being a co-editor appeared to be an easier task than contributing a paper on my experiences that were, I feared, 'no big-deal' instances of normal, small-town life. My father was a head constable in the police department, and this meant that all the four kids in the family were born and brought up in small towns in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. Life in the 'police lines' was spartan but secure. When, on occasion, the family moved out of government accommodation into private rented homes, it would mostly be in the mixed areas of the town. I always regard my childhood as a blessing, particularly when I compare it with the difficult childhood

experiences of so many of my fellow Dalit friends. The blessing, however, has today become a handicap, for it has deprived me of a more eventful past. However, it is not as if I wish I had been born into a typical Dalit, agricultural-labour household only to write about it. And I do not regret the fact that I am able to testify to the existence of enclaves that were, and are, free from the influence of caste. In preparation for writing this paper, I've spent eight weeks trying to recollect how and when caste crossed my path, and it has been a tough but nevertheless rewarding experience. Caste was always there, sometimes as a source of comfort but mostly as an irritant. At school or in the neighbourhoods we lived, caste was not an issue, but there was sure to be a tendency towards categorization, a typical oneness or otherness. This is a story that some may, hopefully, identify with.

Church was the place where I experienced caste in a mostly collegial way. More than 80 per cent of the Christians in coastal Andhra are Dalits. To say that you were a Christian would invite a correction, 'So, you are a Mala?' (or Madiga, as the case might be; these two Dalit sub-castes are the most numerous in the region). It is more a statement than a question. The point is that your religious identity would not be treated as authentic unless it was qualified with your caste identity. And within the 'community' as well, being Dalit or Christian would not do: your sub-caste would determine your place and religious denomination. Although most Christians in coastal Andhra are Protestants, the denominational divisions are primarily based on sub-caste affiliations, and not on doctrinal differentiation. For example, while the Malas are predominant in the Anglican and Lutheran churches, the Madigas are Baptists. Your religion signifies your caste and your denomination gives away your sub-caste! The non-Dalit Christians are confined to unaffiliated, home-based churches. So, Church was the place one would be at home, among not just fellow caste people but also among those of the same sub-caste. It was probably impossible to subdivide the community any further.

In our family, attending Church on Sunday was a must and the tradition still remains unbroken. It would be missed only when nature conspired against or when curfew or 'Section 144' was clamped on the town. Monsoon is kind on coastal Andhra and the cyclonic rains during May—June and October—November keep the citizenry indoors for days at a stretch. My adolescent years in the 1970s were turbulent. There was a major agitation demanding a separate Andhra state, and several movements against a whole lot of other things—against the 'imposition' of the Hindi language, against rising prices, against Indira Gandhi, etc. Barring these exceptions, our family would be there in Church every Sunday and, in fact, since we were extremely punctual we got to occupy the same seats for years!

The Church for us was not just a place of worship. For a community as closely knit as we were, most social life—even matchmaking—would revolve around it. But a community without any divisions within its ranks is a pretty unreal phenomenon, and so we did have our share of politics, which came to fore during elections and in the course of quarrels over petty things. My father had laid down a decree against us taking part in activities other than attending the church. Thanks to him, even two decades after leaving coastal Andhra, we still remember our church life with gratitude and nostalgia. But there was one incident so brutal and traumatic that its memory still rakes up a deep wound within me.

Before I narrate the incident, a word may be necessary on the caste problem among the Dalits in the state. There are sporadic tensions between the Dalits and the others, and even incidents of violence on the former. But a recurring theme in the media—at least for nearly two decades now—is the conflict between the Malas and the Madigas. Malas are roughly similar to the Mahars/Pasis, while the Madigas are akin to the Chamars insofar as their occupation of tanning is concerned. By the way, while caste-occupation is today a thing of the past since very few can and do practice their 'ancestral calling', its cultural attributes remain very strong. Mutual distrust and acrimony between the Malas and Madigas habitually stop just short of violence. Collectively, they may be called Dalits or Scheduled Castes, but there is little that binds them together. They may be Christians or Hindus but they live separately, nay they keep as far away from each other as possible. Their separation extends not just to religious denominations, as mentioned, but to their politics as well. That one subcaste supports a particular political party is reason enough for the other to oppose it, and to the best of my memory Malas and Madigas have never voted for the same party.

The Mala—Madiga conflict resulted in the latter demanding the bifurcation of the reservation quota since, according to them, the Malas were appropriating most of the benefits. The issue entered the state legislature and later surfaced in Parliament, and even the Supreme Court. One doesn't know where the matter lies at the moment, but one can be sure that one has not seen the end of the Mala—Madiga conflict. As usual, both communities rue—in private, of course—that political parties, meaning the upper castes, are dividing them. However, if there is one single occasion on which the politicians may be given the benefit of doubt, this is it. The conflict existed even before the system of electoral politics was introduced. Each child of either sub-caste is taught to continue this cold war, and the process of acculturation starts when one is very young. There is probably only one negative stereotype that each believes of the other. A marriage between these two groups is, needless to say, very rare and I have not come across a case among my friends or relatives.

Into this culturally mad and spiritually corrosive world entered a man of God. During the 1970s, Rt. Rev. N. D. Anand Rao Samuel was Bishop, Krishna—Godavari Diocese, of the Church of South India (CSI), an Anglican church that, by definition, was a predominantly Mala congregation. A lean, handsome man with a voice so gentle, his presence, though not very often at our church since his headquarters were away in another town, would bring upon us a festive mood irrespective of the season. A bishop is never called Bishop in my part of the world. He is always ' *Thandri-garu* , or 'father' with an honorific, an exalted position that is not accorded to even one's own father. Anand Rao Samuel was born to be a '*Thandri-garu*, and with much learning and scholarship did he prepare himself for the role. He is fondly remembered even today, in India and abroad, for his theological acumen and his leadership. I have no memory of his sermons but I vividly remember the appreciation and devotion they generated among the elders.

One day, all of a sudden, in 1978, the car in which he was travelling along with his wife and son was attacked, doused in petrol and set on fire! He survived with serious burns, his son escaped unhurt, but his wife died on the spot. The entire region was shocked at the fate of such a man. For the church, the shock and grief turned into humiliation, for all the culprits happened to be, it was soon found, members of the CSI. The cause was immediately attributed to the Mala—Madiga conflict

though the bishop's family understood it to be driven by church politics, and much later considered caste animosity as a possible motive. Incidentally, all the culprits were Malas. The point is Rev. Samuel was a Mala and his wife, Mrs Florence, was a Madiga. The Malas nursed a grudge that under his wife's influence the bishop was favouring Madigas in church appointments, etc., but I am sure nobody ever did a study to determine if it was indeed the case. But social prejudices and rumours are not formed after carrying out research, something that we are painfully made aware of in the course of everyday life.

So a marriage between two people belonging to two warring sub-castes, taking place as it did decades ago for quite justified private reasons, instead of becoming a model and a bridge between Malas and Madigas ended in tragedy. Leaving aside the countless 'what if … ' hypotheses—what if they had belonged to the same caste, etc.—the incident needs to be treated on par with the other caste abominations that we encounter.

I have no recollection of how I *personally* reacted to the incident in its immediate aftermath, and today I cannot avoid interpreting the incident from the vantage point of 26 years of hindsight, from a viewpoint that belongs to an older man, and one who is much more cynical to boot. Come to think of it, the tragedy of Rev. Samuel might have shaped my behaviour in the years following the incident, as I determinedly stayed away from the Mala—Madiga conflict, treating it more as a nuisance than a real issue. I used to believe that my behaviour was driven by my rationality or some high principles that my fellow wards were incapable of comprehending. But the act of straying away from one's herd need not be elevated to a higher plane: one knows what happens when a lamb loses its way.

[Rt. Rev. Samuel's son N. Paul Divakar, who was travelling with his parents when the attack took place, kindly shared his version when requested to 'validate' the narration of the attack in this paper. Given the variation between a third party's memory and that of the one involved, as a victim, in the episode, we decided to include his comments here.]

On the subject of the Mala—Madiga dynamic being spoken of as being responsible for the incident that happened about 30 years ago, I am not shocked anymore at this interpretation. It was about 18 years ago, after had I finished my studies and started working in the field but away from the church and the diocese, that one of my associates from Krishna District asserted while discussing Dalit politics that the reason behind the attack on my parents was the Mala—Madiga politics! I was shocked to the core. I had until then believed that the reason had been the corruption in the church, with the huge inflow of foreign funds coming into the church during the late 1970s and the way the treasurer and some other officials of the church had been usurping the money as well as the church property with the connivance of a *goonda*, Bhagwan Das. These individuals had also been trying to link up with the land mafia in Vijayawada to meet their ends. Three years prior to the incident, the issue started bubbling over and three false criminal cases—attempt to murder, rape and assault—were filed against my father! Lazarus, the treasurer, and Bhagwan Das had by then started defying the orders of the bishop.

Finally, in 1976, the bishop dismissed Lazarus and de-robed him. Then the conspiracy started to spin deeper and wider as these people tried to intimidate my father, hoping that he would resign and go away. Simultaneously, other things started happening at the Synod-level and within the CSI as a whole. My father was the moderator for the Church of South India and had been so for three consecutive terms by 1977. The Synod (the General Council of the CSI is called the Synod) was to meet in the second week of January 1978 and these people in the Krishna—Godavari Diocese conspired with other aspirants in the Synod to keep the bishop away from the meeting. And so the conspiracy was to scare him away from the Diocese and the Synod or, failing to do so, to finish him off. Actually, my father was planning to leave the church to take up teaching at the university level as he had, by then, spent 20 years as a bishop.

The incident took place on 1 January 1978 and I have provided here an outline of all related facts. And so I was completely shocked when my associate shared with me this particular interpretation 18 years ago. Since then, many who were not even too familiar with the incident or the dynamics of the case have put forth similar accounts, giving the case a Mala—Madiga colour.

I have personally experienced this problem in the course of my work. When I was in the Union at Hyderabad, I had sacked one of the secretaries for non-performance, and he promptly levelled the accusation that I was against Malas! It had not in my wildest imagination struck me to view the matter from that angle. But sure enough, after he had made that allegation, most of the Malas joined into one group and the Madigas into another, and the whole incident was given a sub-caste twist.

That there exists a caste conflict within Dalits is a reality we must bring out. There is also a lot of politics that exploits these differences, at times for extraneous reasons. I am certain that I was not guided in my actions by any consideration related to the Mala—Madiga distinction. As a matter of fact, I am for the underprivileged and I feel that in the context of employment the Madigas are at a disadvantage, and this I try to balance in our appointments, external travel privileges, etc. This balancing act will at times be interpreted as a pro-Madiga stance, even though it is only a state of fairness that I’m attempting to achieve.

After leaving home for hostel life at the university, I could remain neutral on the sub-caste issue while living within the Dalit fraternity. At Andhra University in Visakhapatnam (the university town in those days was known by its more Anglicized name: ‘Waltair’), conditions were rather similar to those in most regional universities at the time. Being a regional university, Andhra University is required to take more than 90 per cent of its students from a handful of districts in coastal Andhra. This, at one level, was comforting since one was living not far away from home among one’s country cousins, and there was no language barrier, and the ‘English medium’ content was for the most part being taught in Telugu. The academic year would start towards the end of December, a result of student unrest and the consequent disruption of the examination schedules. I finished my post-graduation in December two years later and got the degree just in time to join Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi for their M.Phil. programme. So, my two-year M.A. programme ran on for three years! One of the first things

one noticed at the university was that the administration played no part in allocating hostels or rooms to students; students themselves would do the needful.

If I had to pick one word to sum up university life, that word would be 'Caste', our subject matter. Caste was everywhere: groups were formed on the basis of caste and caste also determined the direction of politics and the fate of appointments. Some facets could have been seen from other perspectives as well, but people were more comfortable with caste as the defining feature of life. This fact was noticed by foreigners as well. South Asia security pundit Stephen P. Cohen spent a year as a visiting professor at Andhra University in the late 1970s. Steve, incidentally, was kind enough to invite me as a visiting fellow to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the early 1990s. Responding to my comment on the caste politics at AU, he once narrated how he had received several send-off parties as different caste groups sought to bid him farewell separately. Even 'love affairs'—that colourful Indian expression—would mostly conform to caste and sub-caste boundaries. A few 'stray' incidents generated much heat and consternation among the respective communities. But one particular incident, involving a Kamma female student and a Reddy male student, was beyond my comprehension. These are the two most wealthy, upwardly mobile, and politically powerful castes in the state. During the past quarter of a century all chief ministers of the state have come from one or the other of these two castes. Moreover, these two castes are roughly equal in terms of caste hierarchy, united also by the fact that though they are upper Shudras both often claim Kshatriya status. It could have been a perfect match both in caste and class terms. But their caste cousins would have none of that. Attempts to put some sense into these two delinquent lovers added colour to the campus life. I have no idea how the affair ended, though.

It was but natural that the students and faculty, being from the same region, simply replicated the societal cleavages prevalent back home. I would not like to raise here the question of whether the university should have been more proactive in creating an environment in which campus life could have revolved around secular and modern categories, engaging students intellectually and contributing to the overall academic vibrancy, but this was something I was fortunate to witness later at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

As mentioned earlier, incoming students at AU would be allotted and taken to their hostel rooms by politically enterprising senior students, who would then provide the hostel administration with the names and room numbers of the new students so as to formalize the process. The seniors' generosity would be confined only to fellow caste/sub-caste juniors. Generosity breeds gratitude and gratitude in turn yields votes at the time of university elections. Thus, I secured a room (nay half a room, since all rooms were 'double-seated') in the Nagarjuna Hostel which, by tradition and practice, was an SC/ST/BC(C)/BC hostel. 'SC/ST' is a well-known description for Dalits and Tribals. 'BC(C)' implied Dalit Christians since the state government had by then recognised them as a backward class; the communities termed as BCs then are today referred to as OBCs (Other Backward Classes).

The main fault line was between those categories that enjoyed reservations and the others that did not, and the 'others' mostly meant, in my time, the Kammas who captured political power (through the Telugu Desam Party) in the state in 1983, the same year I went to AU. It was momentous. The TDP was part of an all-India phenomenon of non-Congress OBC parties coming to power primarily as an

alternative to 'distant' rule from Delhi, an issue that became a rallying point in regional politics. But their 'anti-Congressism' was manifested as well in their animosity towards Dalits and Tribals, and this was true of the TDP during the first phase of its rule. We became its first victims when the state government drastically reduced the scholarship amounts of SC/ST students. Until then, the government would pay what was known as 'full mess charges'—that is, instead of paying a fixed scholarship amount to the students, the government would directly pay the university whatever costs were incurred, as 'mess charges'. The new system, on the other hand, required all SC/ST students to get some financial help from their parents, which was very hard on several students. The issue triggered a strike by the SC/ST students demanding the restoration of the old system. We failed to accomplish our goal and ended up losing precious classes owing to the agitation.

This agitation set the tone of our campus life, and the Kamma—non-Kamma polarization was to vitiate the AU atmosphere for a long time. Soon after the incident, the state government provided another 'provocation' to the non-Kamma students. It brought back a former university professor, a parapsychologist, who had left the campus and the country and settled in the United States on a 'Green Card', and appointed him as the vice-chancellor because he was, we were convinced, a Kamma. It was typical of the politics in regional universities that no new vice-chancellor was ever welcomed with open arms, and AU was no exception. Almost all non-Kamma groups found one reason or the other to oppose him and to make his stint as painful as possible. The SC/ST students nursed a special grudge against the VC: he was reportedly the kingpin of an agitation against a Dalit VC several years earlier. However, being a son of the soil, despite his US experience, the parapsychologist VC was determined to fight it out. Today, I can afford to laugh over the matter, but back then it was a difficult situation. One day when we were shouting, 'VC; Go back to America,' he responded, 'Yes, I will, after finishing my term'.

The reader might be tempted to think that life in AU was akin to the Hobbesian State of Nature, but in reality, although there was some violence and tension, life was mostly comical; in other words, it was a 'village' kind of life. Everyone was concerned about his own identity and that of the others, and people suspected other people for unknown reasons. Even the Dalit students were divided into the Mala and the Madiga, and to cap it all, the Dalit Christian students would keep a psychological distance from their fellow Dalits. And we haven't yet reached the end of this description of social disintegration, for cutting across the sub-caste divisions were vicious sub-regional differences, all within that small coastal Andhra region! Known at the time as the Guntur—Godavari divide, students from the Krishna district and downwards were supposed to be different from and not worthy of the trust of the Godavari students, the latter group covering the West Godavari district and upwards up to the Vizayanagaram district. Providence appears to have solved the last problem as the districts of Krishna, Guntur and Prakasam were added to the newly established Nagarjuna University.

While the reader will very likely find much of this quite amusing, the fact remains that these divisions led to the disruption of normal academic life and the loss of precious opportunities among those most in need. However, when it came to fighting for scholarships, etc., these divisions would dissolve, and a broader unity among the weaker sections would take its place. One instance that united most SC/ST students was the Karamchedu massacre of six Dalits (most of them Christian) in

Prakasam District in 1985 by Kamma landlords. This gruesome killing and the state government's apathy were enough justification for us to unleash an agitation. But, once again, the only people who suffered owing to the agitation were us.

Given another chance, my fellow students and I would react in almost the same way as we did two decades earlier since, despite our regret at what was very predictable behaviour on our part, we had been thrust into a situation not of our making. Nevertheless, I must admit, the curse of sub-caste divisions among Dalits, of all people, is shameful. The practice of caste-based prejudice by its very victims will legitimize the system at a fundamental level. My AU experience taught me the reality of caste and the fact that it won't go away no matter how much we oppose it. Another example of how reservation benefits were denied, as in the case of scholarships, and hurdles deliberately placed in the way to claiming them is the case of the student concession tickets for travel by train. All students were given a half-concession on railway fares to go home during vacations and to come back to the university. In its benevolence the government decreed that SC/ST students, being very poor, be given two-thirds concession upon producing a copy of their caste certificate. It became a common occurrence at the Visakhapatnam Railway Station for the booking clerks to find 'unacceptable' mistakes in the concession forms produced by SC/ST students. The clerks would reject the entire form, and the hapless SC/ST students had no option but to either postpone their journey or pay the fare in full!

In 1986 I enrolled myself in the M.Phil./Ph.D. programme in disarmament studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. It was as if I had landed on a different planet. The village politics of caste and sub-caste was replaced by global concerns: American machinations in Afghanistan (not the Soviet occupation of that country), the imminent doom the 'new education policy' was supposed to be inflicting on us, etc. Discussions in the classrooms and canteens were always on a higher plane. I also came to know that my future was intrinsically linked to the heroic battles being waged by Fidel Castro, Daniel Ortega and such revolutionaries against American imperialism. It was here that for the first time I overheard the names of Gramsci, Althusser and other intellectuals.

But caste? Neither was it a topic of discussion nor was it a social category of any relevance. However, caste was a factor in the university elections in the sense that all parties (most of them left-wing formations) would field candidates the way our national political parties did—reflecting caste and regional diversity. For example, each panel would consist of an SC or an ST candidate, a Muslim and a few female students. This genuine cooption obviated the possibility of caste emerging as a force in our campus life. To be sure, there used to be an SC/ST Student's Welfare Association in which I was, being an SC, automatically a member. It was mostly a subaltern—underground, so to speak—movement, and one that hardly met, and when it did, hardly any 'members' showed up.

If I were to treat my experiences as the rule not an exception, I would offer three explanations for the idyllic life in JNU in the 1980s. One, the campus political culture was truly egalitarian, even though sporadic cases of caste discrimination were not unknown. While campus discourse reflected the concerns of the weaker sections, its locus was in ideology, on how we could not solve our problems until we had defeated the neo-liberal and neo-colonial designs. When an atrocity was

perpetrated on Dalits anywhere in the country the whole campus would condemn it and organize protests. Therefore, Dalit students had no exclusive reason to be concerned about 'their' problems. Two, like me, most students came from regional universities and found their lack of English fluency a major handicap. The pressures of coping with considerable class work as well as struggling with English hardly left us with any time to worry about anything else. Lastly, be it in the case of Dalit students or other social groups, each potential formation consisted of members from all parts of India, and as such all groups experienced language barriers and unfamiliarity with each other's local problems.

This exemplary campus life at JNU, compared with life in a regional university, ended abruptly with the announcement in mid-1990 by the V. P. Singh Government of its decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations to extend reservations in central government jobs to the OBCs. All hell broke loose in the campus and all over the country. The event marked a decisive moment in modern Indian history. It was as if the caste virus, until then dormant, had found a way to infect people at will and our defences, built with secular ideology, were too weak to resist this sudden attack. Students' responses to the decision were based to a large extent on whether one was a beneficiary of the proposed reservations or not. The reserved categories (SC, ST, & OBC) supported the implementation of the Mandal recommendations and the 'general' category opposed it. Despite honourable exceptions in both camps, it was back to village politics at JNU. The way the positions were articulated, mostly by the Anti-Mandal students, brought caste into the open. The incident also transformed me from a passive participant/observer into an active participant in caste politics.

Such was the 'transformative' effect of the Mandal implementation that people's ideologies and principles were redefined overnight. Those who were until then opposed to the Left ideology as they believed, among other things, that 'class' was a myth in a caste-ridden society like India, took a U-turn to argue that caste-based reservations, specifically of the Mandal variety, were anachronistic to class realities. The Left groups too suddenly found in caste an indispensable determinant in policymaking. It was thus that the Mandal implementation had the effect of dragging JNU out of its make-believe world and putting it firmly in the real India.

The Mandal implementation caught the OBC students unawares. While they were the beneficiaries of the decision, they faced a different predicament. Traditionally, the OBCs had spearheaded the anti-reservation protests across the country. The Mandal implementation now put them squarely in the reserved category along with the SC/STs. Most of the OBC students chose to remain silent, and a few of them even participated in the anti-Mandal agitations, privately rueing that doing otherwise would expose them as quota students. We, the Dalit students, were initially amused at the development but very soon found ourselves in the middle of the controversy. In fact, we ended up defending the Mandal implementation with more alacrity than the OBCs. We were happy that the 'social justice' front had got a boost with the induction of the OBCs into its fold. We hoped—naively, I must admit now—that the Mandal implementation represented a radical realignment of Indian society where the 'weaker' sections had one more reason to be united. Secondly, we were appalled at the way the anti-Mandal students were articulating their opposition to the issue. They used familiar stereotypes to denigrate the downtrodden, indulging in charades such as shining shoes en masse in the streets to

advertise their take on their likely fate if the reservations were extended to the OBCs. Time and again they refused to restrict their agitation to OBC reservations only, and opposed the reservations in their entirety.

Thankfully, though, JNU could retain its tradition of peaceful and dignified dissent. Heated arguments between the two groups never resulted in violence, which was a saving grace when compared to the violence that raged across the country. The incident reminded me of the controversy over the Ilbert Bill in late-nineteenth century. A proposal to allow native magistrates to try White defendants had led to angry protests from the British, both in India and Britain. The aborted move had convinced the Indians that no matter how good the colonial administration might be, it would never accord them equality. During the time that the Mandal controversy broke out, I was preparing for the civil services examinations in which I had opted for Indian History as a subject, and I saw the unmistakeable parallel between the two situations. Though the Mandal debate was presented in secular terms—with statements such as 'Merit cannot be allowed to suffer,' and 'How do we measure backwardness?'—I was convinced that caste prejudice was the underlying reason for the agitation.

Chandra Bhan Prasad, my friend and a fellow Dalit student at JNU, wields significant influence over my attitudes and actions. That influence occasionally pushes me into 'Dalit activism', something I am thankful for. I can claim to have been a junior partner with CB, over the last few years, in mainstreaming the Dalit agenda. Together with another friend and an IAS officer, Rajasekhar Vundru, we organized the Bhopal Conference in 2002 to highlight the concerns of the Dalits vis-à-vis the new economic policies. Several subsequent debates held across the country on the concerns of the Dalits, including the issue of affirmative action in the private sector, have had their origins in the Bhopal Conference.

One day at the height of the agitation in JNU, the anti-Mandal students gave a call to *gherao* (encircle) the university library. In Indian political parlance, the *gherao* is a well-established, and occasionally intimidating, tactic of agitation. The anti-Mandals were also using more innovative methods. Scores of them, for instance, would deposit one-rupee 'challans' into the government account through the university bank, bringing normal work to a standstill. In carrying out the 'gherao', the students blocked the way to the library by lying on the steps to the entrance. While I must admit that it was a perfectly acceptable method of agitation, something that we could very well have used ourselves had we been agitating for our cause, on this particular occasion, we were determined to foil any attempt to close the library by force. CB, a few other pro-Mandal students and I forced our way into the library by stepping, literally, on our fellow students, some of who happened to be our friends.

Recounting the incident, far from making me happy or proud, leads me to regret the atmosphere of moral relativism that had engulfed the nation at that time. The society around us also failed to live by any benchmarks with regard to expressing dissent or registering dignified protest. Overnight, teachers and parents, the media and the politicians had all lost their sense of proportion. The class-based rational culture of JNU proved to be, to use Ambedkar's phrase, the topsoil. It was washed away in the very first onslaught of prejudice, arrogance and obscurantism. But JNU was not devoid of a silver

lining. Away from the heat and dust, a significant number of students engaged in impassioned debates on the issue, and found much honourable in each other's positions. What use is reason if it gets pushed away by rancour and invective?

Such is the story of my tryst with caste. Though I've never had any personal experience of caste being a hurdle in my career or the reason for any discomfiture, caste has indeed shaped my worldview, without which my understanding of things Indian would have been more wanting than is the case now. My decision a few years ago to expand my research interests into caste studies, especially the socio-economic problems of Dalits, has given me the opportunity to carry out systematic studies on discrimination and caste violence. The experience thus gained so far has reinforced my belief that caste is essentially a group dynamic.

However, there is no denying that I feel a natural affinity towards a fellow Dalit, Christian or not, from my state or not. I believe too, that for two people, being of the same caste does not have to be a condition to found a friendship. We in India keep moving in a maze called caste, trying to find a way out, but there is no easy escape from this reality. So as to not allow caste to vitiate my personal and professional life, I follow a simple rule: Don't tell and don't hide—don't even ask the other for his/her caste. I never on my own reveal my caste identity unless a context requires, nay demands, it; that is, I talk about my being a Dalit only when not doing so amounts to hiding it. Such an occasion took place in 2005 when I visited Germany along with my then Director, Prof. Bibek Debroy, who mentions the visit in his paper (in this volume) to the effect that he came to know there that I was a Christian! Our German friends on that occasion were not the usual academic India hands, capable of starting from Max Mueller. But the few things they knew about India included caste and untouchability. Out of genuine curiosity, they started asking about caste and Dalits, and the two of us were answering them. The friendly probe turned somewhat comical when they asked, and I quote roughly, 'On what days of the week or at what times of the day can the Dalits be sighted in the streets?' That was the moment I knew I could not 'hide' my caste any longer. I told them, which confused them even more.

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The Story of My Caste

Arun Mukherjee

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There was a nursery rhyme that I sang as a child almost every day. Whenever I fought with my playmates, I uttered the following couplet to break up our friendship:

Utti kutti char chubutti
Ham raja tum bhangi[1]

I didn't know what the words 'raja' and 'bhangi' signified. I have a vague memory of asking my playmates about them and being enlightened as to their meaning: the *raja* lived in the fort that dominated the town's landscape and the *bhangi* cleaned our latrines. So, we children learned, at a very young age, that life could offer nothing worse than being a *bhangi*.

I became very conscious of my caste once I reached middle school. Now I noticed, thanks to the daily roll call, that unlike the rest of my classmates who had last names or surnames like Goswami and Kaul and Khare, all I had was my given name, Arun Prabha. My parents, too, had only their given names. Our family, Punjabi refugees from Pakistan, occupied a somewhat ambivalent space in this small town in Bundelkhand where castes and caste roles were very clearly defined. As a child, I remember frequently being asked 'Ko Thakur ho'[2] by thirsty villagers who wanted my water but only after they had made sure that I was from a non-polluting caste. I remember a few times when I could not give a satisfactory answer and the person then went away without drinking the proffered water. And I remember occasions when other people asked for my caste before they would give me any water.

The frequent inquiries, both at school and by thirsty wayfarers, made me feel awkward about not having a caste. Once my mother confronted me with a page in my school notebook where I had

experimented with various caste names (borrowed from those of my class mates): Arun Prabha Goswami, Arun Prabha Srivastava, Arun Prabha Kaul and so on. Once again, I got the lecture that I had heard many times earlier: 'We don't accept the caste system. We are Arya Samajis.'

I would be hard placed to give a chronological account of when I figured out the complexities of the caste system and my place in it, but I remember being confronted by my 'castelessness' again and again as a result of not having a surname. It was, I believe, while listening to adult conversations that I gradually picked up the knowledge that ours was a Punjabi Khatri family, and not of the five-ghara kind (who were really snooty about their higher status) but fifty-one-ghara in fact, and that we were above the Aroras, whom my mother called 'Arore'. I also gathered that the Khatris and the Aroras did not intermarry, although such things were beginning to take place in modern times. I remember detecting a note of disapproval in my mother's and aunts' voices when they were discussing a Khatri—Arora marriage that had recently taken place.

This nuanced awareness set in, I would say, during my teenage years. The rules about who married whom were so well complied with during the time I was growing up that there was no need to even discuss them. The same went for dietary rules. Since there was no culture of anyone ever being invited to other people's homes on social occasions, I had never eaten away from home and the dietary injunctions imposed on me remained invisible. Inter-dining in my small town took place only at deaths, and only *pakka* food was served as part of the ceremonies on the thirteenth day. I remember learning from my mother that Brahmins had to be fed at such times and that they didn't eat *kachha* food[3] at the homes of the lower castes. I remember learning that the Jains in my town did not eat onions or any vegetables grown underground. Generally, I guess, we complied with the caste rules on intermarrying and interdining without even being aware of them. There was no meat market in our town, and if there were meat eaters I never got to see them. My impression that Hindus did not eat meat was strengthened when once, while travelling, my father and I walked into a Muslim eatery without realizing it. We quickly got up and left when we saw the predominantly non-vegetarian menu on the wall. It was only when I reached university that I met non-vegetarian Hindus.

It came as a surprise to me to officially learn that even though my parents and their parents did not write their surname, they did have a caste! While my father seemed above it all, my mother, when asked, would explain to the Bundelkhandi people that we were Kshatriyas of Punjab, equivalent to the Thakurs.

I remember picking up all sorts of information about caste from adult conversations and adult behaviours. One time, a Christian teacher came to our school as an external examiner for the Domestic Science subject. While my school teachers did drink tea with her, I overheard them instructing the school peon to wash the cup very well since Christians were actually 'Mehtars'.

When I think about this incident from my vantage point of today, I am struck by two things. First, the caste distinctions that people talked about and were concerned about involved only the three upper castes. And second, the external examiner was the first Christian I had set my eyes on. My social world that consisted of my family (and its servants), the girls' school I went to, and the friends who also went to the same school, was a homogeneous world made of the three upper castes. We were 'nice' to the Shudra peons and the untouchable latrine cleaner but they were not part of our social

circle. The town had a sizeable population of Jains, but many of them proudly said that Mahavir was a Kshatriya prince and that the Jains were really Kshatriyas or Vaishyas.

So who were the 'Mehtars' that the Christians were supposed to have been before conversion? A Mehtar, I knew, was the person who came to clean our latrine. Like most middleclass homes in this town, our home had a service latrine, and Parmanand came to clean it. I do not recall thinking about where he took our excrement after he left our house, and why he had to clean it in the first place. I have revisited this absence of curiosity time and again to excavate my then self in order to understand why I took it for granted that Parmanand and, after his death, his wife Sheila, were assigned to clean my excrement. I think that the truth would have been so horrible for me to contemplate that I blocked it out of my mind. Or, to put it another way, my social conditioning was carried out so well, that such questions never arose in my mind.

Nobody in my social environment talked about the rightness or wrongness of the fact that a human being had to clean and carry other human being's excrement. The caste system, and the places we had been assigned within it, was not a part of our school and college curricula. The cleaning of the latrine was our once-a-day interface with the Mehtar, which lasted hardly 15 minutes. S/he came in through the back door, first did the dry cleaning of the latrine with ashes and then brought out the pitcher and called out for me or whoever had heard him/her fill it, and that was it. I don't remember consciously avoiding touching Parmanand or Sheila, but there was no need to anyway, for they too avoided touching me. This interface was a fact of life, which needed no thinking about. It was just the way things were.

It was in 1968 just before my marriage that my father got a septic-tank latrine built so that our relatives coming from distant parts of the country to our backwaters wouldn't be inconvenienced. The Sulabh toilets, as I note from their Web site, did not arrive on the scene until 1970. Ours was among the first homes that got the 'new' latrine. In any case, my town was hardly plugged into the world outside. As I was to discover later in life, there were many, many things that I never heard of while I lived there: Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, his death and the conversions of his followers, the civil rights movement in the United States, the Cuban Revolution, Vietnam, the Suez Crisis, the Beatles, Marilyn Monroe, and I could go on adding.

The currents of world and national events did not reach me even when I left my town to move to a nearby university town in 1964. I lived in a bubble where all my fellow female students were, like me, from the middleclass and upper castes. All my teachers were also from the upper castes and the majority of them were Brahmins. Only the *bais* at the hostel who cleaned our rooms and utensils, and the *chowkidars* were different. Although I did not think of them as lower caste at that time, in hindsight, I know now that they were different from me because of their caste. They were illiterate and I was literate, they spoke a dialect and I spoke Hindi and English. They were servants and I was the served. I never thought of these differences between us as based on caste. In fact, it now seems to me that I never thought of these differences as anything but hard facts, things as they were.

There is one incident that stands out my memories and that illustrates the workings of my mind around the time I was in my early teens. One day, as I was coming home with a bunch of oranges in my shopping basket, a village woman, in town to sell her produce, stopped me to ask what they were.

I was so struck by her ignorance of such an ordinary thing that I came home and told my father about my shock over meeting this woman who didn't even know what an orange was. I wish now that my father had been harder on me than he was. All he said to me was that village folk were simple people and they did not know what an orange was because it did not grow in our area.

What I think now is that I and people like me continued to think of the villagers that we met in the town bazaar as ignorant rather than poor and low caste, or low caste and therefore poor. I remember hearing and participating in discussions about the magnitude of their ignorance. They did not know the importance of fruit for the sick; did not follow the doctors' instructions, but prayed to the *Devi* for the cure; had too many children; and refused to send their children to school and, instead, married them off at an early age. One of my memories of my early teen years is about going to the surrounding villages in a jeep provided by the Social Welfare Department. I, my mother, and the wives of the government officers visited these villages with a gramophone, biscuits and a superior attitude: we were there to bring the light of knowledge, to tell these benighted folks about hygiene, nutrition, the importance of sending their children to school, etc.

As soon as our jeep arrived, half-naked [clad] children would come running and surround the jeep, attracted by the gramophone and the biscuits. Since the wives of the District Collector and the Superintendent of Police were in the jeep, the village *mukhia* and other important men would come out to meet us. However hard we tried, we met very few women. When, after much persuasion, a prominent villager brought out his wife, she would not uncover her face, despite much hectoring from our team. Now when I think about these encounters between me and the villagers during the late '50s and the early '60s, I can categorize them as encounters between the privileged upper castes and the deprived lower castes. The roads to these villages, which were hardly 5 to 8 kilometres away from the town that was the district headquarters, were non-existent, and the villagers did not have access to schools or healthcare centres. Today I wonder about the internalized unselfconsciousness that allowed us, a group of upper caste and upper class women, to lecture these villagers to observe hygiene and send their children to school.

In today's terminology, the villagers I am talking about would fall under the OBC category. The untouchables, we had very little to do with, except for the individual who came once a day to clean our latrine. He or she came from what was known as the '*harijan basti* (I do not know what their area was called before this Gandhian renaming), an area that was on one remote side of the town, which I had never had an occasion to visit. The only other untouchables I saw were the municipal workers who swept the roads. We avoided them as we passed by due to the swirling clouds of dust kicked up by their brooms. When I moved to the university, my interface with those from the untouchable castes ceased completely. Why was it so? In writing this account, I have thought about this matter. After all, there were toilets in the hostel and there was a woman who cleaned them. Well, I now realize, it was just that I never saw her and never gave a thought to her job. Both she and the work that she did for me became invisible to my consciousness. Obviously, I took the availability of a clean toilet completely for granted. And while it was true that the toilets were not always perfectly clean, and we the hostellers constantly complained about it, things never went any further.

Looking back at what constituted the social life around me, it is so clear that every single bit of

work was caste-defined. There were the *mochis* who mended our shoes, the *dhimars* who fetched water for us from the well (piped water did not arrive in my town until 1959), the *dhobis* who washed and ironed our clothes, the *nais* who cut the hair of the male members of our family, the *yadavs* (generally) who brought us milk, the *darjis* who sewed our clothes, and the *kachis* and the *kunjaras* who sold us vegetables. In the hostel, the mess was run by a Panditji. And yet, it never occurred to me then. I suppose my bourgeois unconscious thought of the arrangement as a result of voluntary choices.

I never thought of my access to higher education as a privilege. It was something I was doing, at times unwillingly, because my parents wanted me to. Conversely, I never thought of why all my classmates were from the higher castes. I presume that I thought of us all as individuals making free choices or following our parents' wishes. When I saw children and adults defecating by the roadside, I was, like my companions, outraged by their 'shamelessness'. Clearly, the social and economic arrangements around me were so 'normalized' that my thought processes did not go any further and ask why these people did not have toilets at home, or, for that matter, why I did not have to sit by the roadside.

I believe that we have barely scratched the surface of how the human mind is conditioned to notice some things and obliterate others. It is only through such conditioning that the great injustices are perpetrated in this world. It is so clear to me now that I was conditioned from very early childhood to take certain things for granted and to think in a certain way.

It was at the university that I first came in contact with Christians. The Christian girl in my M.A. English class was a Syrian Christian. She proudly told me that her ancestors were Brahmins before they converted to Christianity. So, if Christianity had provided an avenue of escape to the lower castes (like the external examiner who came to my school), it wasn't something that we talked about. In fact, we never talked about religious matters. And when I think today about my Syrian Christian friend's pride in her Brahmin ancestry, it seems to me that she, too, must have been insecure about being mistaken for a Mehtar's, or a Paravan's, descendant.

Looking back on those early years of my life, it seems to me that I and the other young women (I rarely had the occasion to meet my male class fellows socially) lived in the caste system as fish live in water. It was everywhere around us and within us and yet we were unaware of its power. Yes, one of the places it became visible was in the hostel mess where the dining hall was divided between two groups: the vegetarians and the non-vegetarians. Panditji's mess served the vegetarians who were in a majority in this Madhya Pradesh town. I do not know who ran the non-vegetarian mess, but it was certainly not a Muslim or a Christian. But even in this case, I associated my vegetarian diet with my family tradition rather than my caste, not realizing that they were one and the same.

Something changed in my parents' house during the 1970s. When I arrived in 1975 after a four-year stay in Canada, I found that Sheila was cleaning our dishes as well as the service latrine, which now was used only by my mother who found the crouching posture required to use the septic-tank latrine difficult. After her work was done, my mother served Sheila food, in the same dishes in which we ate. My mother, lying on the *charpai*, and Sheila, sitting below, would gossip about things for an hour

or so every day before Sheila went home. On some days, Sheila pressed my mother's legs. Sheila's younger son lived in our house and swept the rooms after coming back from school (he did not last long in the school as the teachers and the other children treated him very shabbily).

I never talked about these changes with my mother, and I heard out her proud declamations that she did not believe in caste. Why, then, had this change come about only in the 1970s? Was it because until then my mother had been afraid of breaking the town's rules and facing ostracism? Was it because Sheila was a very nice woman, and she and my mother had developed a sort of friendship? Or, was it because my mother needed her and her son's services? I believe all of the above had something to do with it. However, because of this breach of social taboos, some of our visitors stopped taking tea at our house. One neighbour would insist on sitting on one our chairs that did not have a cushion. When I asked my mother about this, she laughed and said that wood was an 'un-pollutable' substance.

I remember an argument that I had with an acquaintance during that particular visit. He was criticizing all things Western, and me for living in the West, and as a proof of the superiority of Indian culture, he claimed that Indians called even the lowly *jamadar* '*chacha*' as a mark of respect for his age. I retorted that it was an empty gesture as long as people refused to touch him, let alone share food or drink with him. This exchange is evidence that I had by then become aware of the injustices of the caste system and the concept of untouchability. However, it would take me another 15 years to learn about Ambedkar and read his angry words in *What Gandhi and the Congress have done to the Untouchables.*

I stumbled on this work fortuitously, and not because my education had guided me to it. In fact, it had made sure that I would never learn of the truths behind the social order and the privileges of my caste. Reading this book was the transformative moment in my life, the moment when I became truly conscious of how the world is ordered and my own place in it. This was the moment when my real education began.

I now see caste writ large everywhere and am constantly surprised that I did not notice earlier what now seems so obvious to me. Isn't it amazing, I wonder, that night after night on my TV screen, in the magical universe of the Hindi cinema, the name of the hero is always either Raj Malhotra or Raj Chopra and he conveniently falls in love with a heroine named Ria Mehra, or Priya Chopra? I look at the names of Indian university professors or journalists, or businessmen, and notice that they are all high caste, barring a rare exception. And yet, there is no dearth of people who say that caste does not matter anymore!

My Indo-Canadian students are surprised to learn that their surnames are caste names. I start my lectures on caste by writing down my own caste name, Mukherjee (albeit patronymic), on the board and by telling them that it signifies the highest type of Bengali Brahmin in the caste hierarchy. I then share a story with them about an Indo-Caribbean Canadian woman who had asked me if I knew anything about the caste background of Indian people who had gone to the Caribbean as coolies. She had gone to shop at an Indian grocery store and the shopkeeper had told her in a patronizing voice that it was the low castes that had gone to work in the Caribbean. Even though she does not have a surname that denotes her caste, like many Indo-Caribbean Canadians, this encounter with a recently-

arrived, high-caste Indian from India had caused a crisis of identity within her. That I met her at an Ambedkar birth anniversary celebration suggests to me that she has now identified herself with those who want caste hierarchies annihilated rather than hide behind the comforting idea that the concept of caste has already disappeared.

Caste may not operate in Canada as stringently as it does in the town where I was brought up, but it continues to operate as a 'structure of feeling'. For example, when I presented a paper at the Ambedkar centenary celebrations in Toronto, I received threatening phone calls and was told about how low caste doctors were killing patients, low caste professors were producing sub-standard students, and that if reservations continued to discriminate against merit India had no future. I continue to come across such sentiments at social gatherings. These social gatherings continue to be composed of people from the high castes, and the places of worship are also similarly segregated. There are *Raidasi gurud-waras*, for example, in both Toronto and Vancouver. And so, while I may have mentally broken the shackles of caste, I still circulate in a social environment that is homogeneously high-caste.

I recently went on a visit to my hometown and one of the people I met was Sheila, in the *harijan basti*. I would not call it a visit as, according to custom, Sheila did not invite me inside, very happy though she was to see me. Following the hierarchical rules that governed our relationship, she promised to come to see me. I wonder whether she thought that her home was too lowly for the likes of me to be asked to come in. Sheila's home, like most others in the *basti*, I noticed, is now *pukka*. She no longer cleans service latrines. I was told by my friend that service latrines have become obsolete as middle-class homes have all built septic-tank latrines. The rest still use the roadside.

During my week-long stay in the town, I was heartened to see that the local newspaper had carried the news of a Bahujan Samaj Party meeting condemning the mutilation of Dr Ambedkar's statue in Kanpur. Although all the names mentioned were male, it was still something, quite a change from my time growing up there fifty years ago when there were no local newspapers, no Bahujan Samaj Party and no statue of Ambedkar at the town square.

However, some things have still not changed. When Sheila came to visit me at my friend's house, she sat on the floor, refusing a chair. I wonder if that refusal was Sheila's assertion that regardless of such gestures, her grandchildren today are still as vulnerable as her son was in 1975.

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A Couple's Journey through Challenges of Dalit Identity

Annie Namala and N. Paul Divakar

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This is the account of our lives, coming from across Dalit and non-Dalit identities. Unconsciously following one of Babasaheb Ambedkar's ways to overcome casteism through inter-caste marriage, we in this journey have come to terms with our identities individually and together. At the same time, we have explored ways to creatively engage with a process of Dalit empowerment and move towards a more egalitarian and just society for all of us. We recognize the need for both Dalits and non-Dalits to be engaged with the process of empowering Dalits and, for that matter, all marginalized communities in our society, and hope our dilemmas will resonate with others among us who are also exploring ways of building a truly secular, democratic and humanistic society.

The Bliss of Caste-free Upbringing—The Christian Religious Identity

It may sound strange that Paul recognized his Dalit identity rather late. Being born into a family that had embraced Christianity almost four generations ago, the Christian religious identity was more pronounced in his upbringing. His great grandfather's mother had run away from her village as a young widow with a small child and found shelter in a British family as a nanny. The family must have supported and treated her well, for she stayed with them and educated her son Samuel who eventually became a District Collector. It is said she had gone to England with the family as the nanny. Samuel married and conscious of the role of education, he ensured that all his children, both boys and girls, were highly educated. Two became medical doctors, one an engineer, one became a District Collector and Paul's grandfather completed his engineering from Guindy Engineering College in Chennai and served as a Superintending Engineer in the composite Madras State. All these generations were founding figures and were actively involved in building the church in

Machilipatnam, near Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh. Paul's father, Dr N. D. Ananda Rao Samuel, decided to take up full-time ministry; he completed his bachelor's degree in theology from the United Theological College, Bangalore, and became a pastor and later Bishop and Moderator of the Church of South India (CSI).

On his mother's side too, the Christian identity predominated. Paul's maternal grandfather, Isaac, was a Methodist pastor. His maternal grandmother, Lucy, was a medical doctor and was one of the seven women students of the first batch of Dr Ida Scudder at the Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore. Both the families, thus, had strong and public Christian identities and the caste factor did not figure much in Paul's childhood. He spent his childhood in Eluru where his father served as a Pastor. With Eluru and Vijayawada being small towns at that time with fairly large Christian communities and well-known Christian institutions, and since his early studies took place in St Xavier's School, a Catholic school in Eluru, Paul was not particularly familiar with caste dynamics when he was a child. He moved on to the Madras Christian College School in Chennai, and then to Loyola College and Madras Christian College (MCC) for graduation, and later to the Madras School of Social Work for post-graduation in Social Work. Thus, Paul's childhood in the midst of Christian schools, the Christian church and community, and the environment of a mission compound, did not prepare him all that well to face issues such as the caste identity of Christian communities or caste issues at large or the plight of the Dalit communities of his time.

For me, too, there was the bliss of a caste-free childhood, though in some ways my bliss was a result of opposite reasons, arising from the other end of the caste spectrum. I was born into a Jacobite Syrian Christian family and spent my childhood in a small town near Kollam (in Kerala). My family closely identified itself with the Jacobite Syrian Church. The church the family attended was a stone's throw away from our house. I too went to Christian schools and colleges, both in Kerala and Chennai and, as a result, I did not recognize or identify with the caste dimension in my childhood or college years. Having moved out of Kerala at a young age into a mixed milieu of religion, language and culture, I was not particularly rooted in the Kerala culture or the Syrian Christian tradition. I also didn't find anything particularly uncomfortable or displeasing about my traditional middle class Christian environment. The issue of caste never came up for discussion in my family, except at the time of my marriage, when there was some speculation on Paul's caste identity. However, as the family was opposed to the marriage on very many counts, caste did not register as a prime factor. I didn't know either that the Jacobite Syrian Church looked down upon the CSI, a church of the 'neo lower caste converts'.

Caste Identification in the Indian Church

Paul's father strongly believed in the faith of the church that 'There's no Jew or gentile in Christ.' He did not confront caste issues in the church and seemed to think that conversions took away the sting of caste from the life of a Christian. The CSI was an amalgamation of diverse churches. It was born in 1947, the same year that India gained Independence, but the presence of various missionaries and the church's interaction with them remained strong, placing the church in a wider cultural interface. The

times were one of hope for change and social transformation. A number of Christians were experiencing considerable mobility in terms of education, employment and institution-building, which might have contributed to the sense that caste issues and identities could be bypassed. Added to this could also be the fact that Paul did not grow up in a typical village where caste continues to dominate everyday life even after one's conversion to Christianity. Many non-Christian Dalits recount how the notions of low and high, inferiority and domination could become factors even at a later stage in life in rural areas. While spending the early years of life within Dalit habitations, many report a lack of caste-based consciousness of hierarchy, exclusion and discrimination. The span of this protection from the blights of caste varies, and children from educated, employed, urban Christian families tend to have a longer caste holiday compared to other Dalit children.

This fairly long period of protection in some ways helps to nurture a sense of security, equality and confidence, but prepares one very little with the theoretical or practical knowledge to handle the dilemmas when one begins to confront them. This results, on occasion, in individuals looking to disengage from the process of identifying with their backgrounds or with the community they come from, which takes away a lot of potential support for the community at large. Not wanting to engage with caste issues, many Christians question why they should involve themselves in the quagmire of caste when they put it behind them generations ago. If overcoming caste involves re-assuming an unwanted identity that a section of people have successfully relinquished, then these people do not want anything to do with such a process. This has resulted in non-engagement in the sense that the message seems to be, 'We have come out of this with great effort and hard work; you better do it the same way on your own.' Even while protected from it, engaging with a caste identity involves working through a process of conflict and dilemma, as was the experience for Paul.

Circumventing and Substituting Rather than Confronting Caste

Paul's parents did not introduce him to issues of caste, registering his identity in school as an Indian Christian. They made efforts to inculcate in him the foundations of anti-caste or alternate norms and values, be they based on justice and humanism or on Christianity. They nourished a strong sense of human dignity, equality, concern and love. The home was open to all, it being the house of the pastor and bishop; people from both the rural and urban areas were forever visiting and staying in with the family as guests for short and long periods. They were given the same respect as members of the household and children were expected to extend all courtesies to the guests.

When it came to Leelamma, Moshe and Abraham, who helped in the house while living within the mission compound and had strong ties with the Dalit colonies in the town, there was no difference in treatment. They were treated with respect and a sense of equality and dignity. No restraints were placed on the children and they were free to visit the homes of these people, have food with them, pray together, etc.

While these values were contrary to caste norms, there was also no active or public confrontation in the name of caste. Children were strictly prohibited from visiting the Dalit colonies in town; further, purchasing beef from the market or cooking beef at home was not allowed. There were never

any discussions on caste or on the Dalit identity and untouchability. Since Paul's father travelled extensively in the rural areas where caste was a predominant factor even in the lives of Dalit Christians, who continued to live in the same Dalit colonies in which they had grown up, the congregation would most certainly have confronted the issues of untouchability and caste-based discrimination and conflicts. His diocese comprised very rural and typically caste-dominated areas, and there couldn't have been a way for Paul's father to avoid taking caste factors into consideration. It could be that he had underestimated the intensity of caste-based motivations or failed to gauge the extent to which caste factors had permeated into the church. Even in later times when caste issues in the church and our work brought him to discuss the effects of the caste system, he held on to a humanistic view of life and never involved himself with caste *per se*.

Sub-caste Identities

Paul's mother succumbed to a murderous attack on the family in 1978, in retaliation to Paul's father taking action against a few office bearers of the church for misappropriation of money in the construction of hostels. It was a surprise and a shock to the family to hear the version of many Christians in the area, which was that the attack was motivated by a conflict between two Dalit sub-castes. Paul's father had belonged to the Mala community while his mother came from the Madiga community, the two main Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh. The family had always linked the attack to the stern action taken by Paul's father, but an impression gained ground that some Malas, unhappy with Paul's father for allegedly giving greater preference to Madigas under the influence of his wife, had perpetrated the crime. While it is stretching one's imagination to think why a murder attempt should be made over such an issue since a resolution could have been found through several peaceful means, it is revealing that many people found this reason sound enough to believe it.

It is also surprising that when such identity-related issues and the resultant enmity are acknowledged as the norm by Christians themselves, Paul's parents could have had an inter-caste marriage. Their decision to marry was greeted, initially, with minor opposition from both families, but later it was not only accepted but welcomed. Within the families, the sub-caste differences never surfaced. Even at the time of our marriage, the issue of caste did not surface at Paul's home. The concerns were more about the nature of Paul's commitment and whether he was ready to enter a long-term relationship.

Internalization of the 'Untouchable' Identity

Paul and I, both, took up post-graduation in Social Work at the Madras School of Social Work from 1977 to 1979. Paul joined the course after completing his graduate studies in Statistics from the MCC whereas I had done my graduation in Zoology from the Women's Christian College (WCC). Paul had been associated with leprosy rehabilitation and other social work related to community development and youth issues during his time at the MCC; for me, however, it was more about the need for a change away from studying science further. Even though Masters in Social Work did not put us, in any

theoretical or practical way, face to face with issues such as untouchability and discrimination, we were nevertheless exposed to the village caste structure during our fieldwork, and that brought about the realization that some of our classmates had not had the same advantages of exposure and fluency in the English language as we did. This could, as we understood then, be attributed as much to poverty, the parental literacy rate, or gaps in the rural infrastructure as to caste-based disabilities.

Immediately after our marriage, we went to live and work in Ibrahimpatnam, a small town in rural Telangana, about 60 km from Hyderabad. Telangana is famous for the Telangana armed struggle during the 1950s. The cultural and mass mobilization of the area is also phenomenal. Despite the region's history of social upheavals, the caste boundaries there were distinctly demarcated, and people by and large operated within them; social interface across caste was limited. Housing was demarcated; the practice of untouchability was the accepted norm and nobody questioned the caste system.

However, this did not draw Paul's attention as much as the class and economic factors related to poverty did. The prime concerns of his work were landlessness, low wages, bonded labour, illiteracy and child labour, the dependency of the labouring class on the dominant landed castes, and women's participation in social issues. Violence surfaced when a labourer was murdered and efforts were made to cover up the incident as an accident. We were exposed to the systematic nature of exploitation as we engaged with the release and liberation of bonded labourers as part of our work. The connection of these evils to caste was quite obvious if one were to analyse it from there; however, our education or experience had not fine-tuned us to the same. During this period I was not directly involved in the work, the reason being my unfamiliarity with the Telugu language. The necessity of maintaining focus on the lower caste sections who were afflicted with these problems was our agenda at that time, and since this required considerable proactive work—often outside the pre-defined scope of our responsibilities—it meant that we were not involved in analysing caste or studying about caste-based discrimination and disabilities.

The recognition of the additional vulnerability and violent exploitation of the lower castes laid the foundation of our work at *Prajwala*, in Chittoor, from 1985. We had decided to work with members of the lower castes—the Dalit communities; we went into their colonies, initiated rapport-building, engaged their youth and encouraged them to be part of the movement, mobilized them to reach for their rights and entitlements, and worked towards building a people's organization to realize these goals. Our firm belief was that people would come together across caste boundaries for the common purpose of gaining their rights. Thus, while the work from 1985 primarily focused on the Dalit communities in terms of them being the most marginalized in our social and economic context, it was still not based on a firm grounding of caste analysis or identity issues.

Collective work was very much a part of our culture in Chittoor district right from the very beginning. About 40 NGOs in the state came together in a forum called the *Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Coolila Sangham* (APVCS) that helped initiate an agricultural workers' union in the state. APVCS began to collectively address land issues, strengthening the Panchayat Raj system and taking up cases of untouch-ability and atrocities against Dalits with a definite caste perspective. It was, however, much later that Paul came face to face with his own identity of being a Dalit.

It was during 1990–91, the Ambedkar centenary year, that we as activists working on Dalit issues organized a number of *padayatras*, campaigning and mobilizing communities to generate awareness on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. At APVCS we also decided to organize a cycle rally across Andhra Pradesh, to take the message forward. This was planned as a mammoth programme, involving month-long cycle rallies from the four corners of the state to converge at Hyderabad. Each of the routes had over a hundred cyclists. We were supported by a number of organizations from across the state and were able to take the message throughout the state. At the meeting called to plan for the Ambedkar Shatajayanthi Cycle Rally, there was much discussion on who would be the convenor to coordinate the entire programme. T. D. John, one of the senior leaders of APVCS, suddenly came up to Paul and enquired about his caste background. Paul was taken aback and replied that he was a mix of the Mala and Madiga castes. John proposed that Paul be the convenor for the cycle rally, saying that being a mix of Mala and Madiga would be the best attribute for a convenor to have. It came as a shock, not only the criterion for selection, but more so the fact that it was the first time Paul had been identified as a Dalit.

Asserting the Dalit Identity—Rejecting Negative Self-image

After accepting the convenorship, Paul spent a lot of time in the days that ensued trying to understand his new Dalit identity. We sat around and pondered, trying to assess the implications for Paul, in his work as well as family and relationships. Paul had many questions: how would others perceive him as a Dalit? Was he receiving benefits on the basis of his new identity? These were questions deeply tied to his self-image and sense of worth, but no answers were forthcoming. What benefits would the Dalit agenda gain from his identity assertion? Where should he identify himself as a Dalit and where he should he not? Was the convenorship an act of benevolence? The days were ones of intense dilemmas and trauma for Paul. While we might not have understood everything and might not have known where the process would lead on, the Dalit self-identification grew for Paul and his work took on a more pronounced Dalit-human-rights perspective.

Though Dalits were the main beneficiaries of the development programmes and NGO operations, there was very little Dalit leadership building in the process, even within the organizations implementing the development programmes. In the early 1990s we recognized the need to promote Dalit leadership in the NGO sector, primarily to take up issues related to Dalit human rights in a more systematic manner. Thus, a number of small networks that worked with the Dalit identity and agenda were initiated in the districts of AP; all of these came together to constitute a larger platform, *Dappu*, in 1998.

While APVCS intervened in cases that involved the unjust or violent treatment of Dalit communities, it did not explicitly recognize the Dalit identity. Most members belonged to non-Dalit communities, and were committed to taking up the issues of Dalits since Dalits were the most vulnerable communities in society. *Dappu* took up the Dalit agenda more directly and forcefully, basing its social analysis and judgement with regard to the vulnerability of social groups on the caste perspective; further, *Dappu* had an agenda to promote Dalit leadership, stake-holding and agency.

Dappu was open to non-Dalits as 'Dalit *Sahavasis*—sojourners with Dalits', partners in the journey for Dalit empowerment. It, thus, provided greater space for Dalits and the membership drew primarily from the Dalits, with a few non-Dalits also part of the process.

The *Dappu* process was strongly based on the Dalit identity; it focussed on over-coming the typically negative victim-images and building on the strengths and positive images of the Dalit self. This also meant that the non-Dalit image was understood as an exploitative and unwelcome one. Somewhere along the line these portrayals got too complicated, as did the personalities, personal styles and the processes of *Dappu*, which as an institution did not have at that time the knowledge or mechanisms to create a healthy and creative interface between Dalits and non-Dalits. It is another matter that both Dalits and non-Dalits left the collective for different reasons, but the presence of a strong Dalit identification was one of the reasons behind non-Dalits leaving *Dappu*. While some of the non-Dalits continued a parallel journey with the process, as supporters from outside, the fact remains that the space in the collective was not one that could hold together both the identities equally strongly.

Experiencing Exclusion from the Other End

Within *Dappu*, there were frequent discussions on the Dalit and non-Dalit identities and on the prospect of collaboration between the two groups. Even as a non-Dalit, I was confronted with the question of my identity given that I was married to a Dalit. One opinion was that I too should be considered a Dalit. However, I did not think it was right for me to claim this identity since I had not been born into a Dalit family, nor had I ever experienced the disempowering effects of caste firsthand.

What had drawn me to this work was a strong sense of justice and empathy for the poor, along with my feelings of patriotism. Activism in the wake of the Tsundur atrocity, the Social Justice rally and the Ambedkar *padayatras* had increased the levels of understanding and commitment to the Dalit cause. Unlike at *Prajwala*, devotion to the Dalit identity was the keystone to all our work at *Dappu.*

In early 1990, the Dalit Voluntary Action Forum (DVAF) was established as a Dalit NGO that was to work on the basis of its Dalit identity. It was at this juncture that I had my first experience of being excluded from my erstwhile network; more-over, the distinct natures of our identities—Paul's and mine—as Dalit and non-Dalit came to the forefront; Paul was one of the initiators of the DVAF, while I, as mentioned, had been excluded. It was one thing for me to intellectually appreciate the rationale for the forum, but the physical experience of exclusion was quite another matter. *Dappu* emerged around 1998, and it went a step further as it looked to have 'Dalit *Sahavasis*' as active and equal partners in the process of building it. I actively took part in the entire process along with others like Kurian Katticaren, Nandagopal and Thomas Pallithanam. I also facilitated the reorganization of *Prajwala* as an organization fully owned and accountable to the *Dappu* process, while at the same time moving out of the organization myself. In keeping with the norms of *Dappu* of having only Dalits in leadership positions and as representatives, I took up various intermediary responsibilities between 2000 and 2004.

At *Dappu*, there were intense discussions on the Dalit identity and on issues such as leadership and the role of non-Dalits within the organization. The complex dynamics of these processes involved not just social and political aspects, but also became intimately personal, weaving into our perceptions, responses, styles and goals as individuals, and could not be defined or clarified easily. I couldn't remain unaffected for long by the aggressive identity assertion in *Dappu* and many of our private discussions at home were carryovers from the collective.

It was a period of intense soul-searching for both of us. I began to feel a sense of marginalization, bordering on negation. The projection was that *Dappu* might be compromising in including Dalit *Sahavasis*, all the time wishing it could be otherwise. There was also a feeling of being used by the network, and the insecurity that given the chance the network would throw you away. My work and contributions for over two decades were being questioned suddenly and I had become a suspect. Distinct from Paul, who was suddenly confronted by his Dalit identity, I was struggling with my non-Dalit identity, and the two were juxtaposed unfavourably. At *Dappu*, the Dalit identity became the valid identity, and the non-Dalit identity the expendable one: the other.

From either side, the process of exclusion and negation had similar dynamics. First, it involved identifying those who could be categorized as 'the other' or 'the outsider'; then the process would involve questioning their relevance and contribution, and belittling that contribution. This resulted in intense conflict and self-doubt within the so-called outsiders. Uncertainty and hesitation would thus overpower any impulse to make a creative contribution, and a culture of silence would set in if one were to put up with such conditions for long. The politics of identity could also be easily subverted and made to yield individual benefits, and that is how everything became more complex, with different levels of collusion between various actors and participants. Working with ASP for about two years, and feeling that politics rather than good practices and professional ethos was directing the organization, I decided to leave *Dappu* in 2005. My situation was all the more delicate since I Paul's wife in addition to being a non-Dalit! I felt that I was being used for political motives and my contribution was not welcome to the leadership. It was a very difficult decision for me and I mulled over it for almost six months before deciding to move out of *Dappu* and work on Dalit issues at a different place.

In a way, I was sensitized by my experiences at *Dappu* on the pains of exclusion, whatever context it might arise from. The crushing burden of the caste system borne by Dalit communities for generations, I could now begin to contemplate: negated and limited in day-to-day interactions, not being able to walk across caste locations, talk across caste barriers, explore opportunities of education and employment beyond given norms, and being treated forever as unwanted and unclean. One is not surprised to know that teenage girls from the *Mushahar* community in Bihar have never ever spoken to girls of similar age belonging to the dominant communities. Once, to a question as to what non-Dalits felt upon the presence of a Dalit, a young Dalit boy in his teens immediately replied, 'Repulsion!' Such responses can only be the outcome of untold experiences of exclusion, the result of bearing the psychological brunt of the practice of untouchability. It is really a miracle that Dalit communities still survive and have a sense of hope and joy as well as the energy to move ahead, when one considers how they have been ground down for generations. Maybe it becomes imperative

to cultivate a sense of anger or defiance of the system to counter the system. Dalits in many parts of the country are forced to retain and remain within the 'image' that non-Dalits have created for them, in terms of how they ought to live, learn, practice their occupations, speak their language, profess their culture and so on. One cannot be 'uppity' or hope to aspire beyond one's caste status. Recently a graduate in one of the villages of Bihar said that he had to give up setting up a private school in his village as the Yadav community youth had already started one and did not want any competition. They threatened him and, fearing violence, he closed the school after running it for two months.

Caste and Patriarchy as National Problems

The caste system breeds hierarchy and resultant inequalities. Exclusion and discrimination are made out to be more a problem of Dalits than that of the nation. Many progressive people, following Gandhi's reasoning, are willing to accept the practice of untouchability as an aberration within the caste system and make half-hearted attempts to amend it. It is perhaps worth noting that while Gandhi presented the dominant view of solving problems related to caste in an ameliorative manner, Ambedkar with his experience of the disabilities and humiliation imposed by the caste system advocated a radical change in the social system that would do away with the hierarchical system and create an egalitarian society that would do away with not just untouchability but also indignity, inequality and backwardness and put all Indians on the path of fraternity, liberty and equality: a society that promoted justice, democracy and development. We as a country were unwilling to take the hard options then and continue to struggle with the same issues almost sixty years later, the lifetime of two generations. There is no other way out than recognize and address the caste system and the inequalities and injustices spawned by it as a national problem. We have identified polio eradication and the prevention of starvation deaths, alongside HIV and AIDS awareness, our national issues, but we refuse to take up untouchability and inequality as national problems. In recent years, the appalling treatment meted out to Dalits in the aftermath of the Tsunami and the incidents in Khairlanji and Nithari have revealed the diverse aspects of the caste system that must necessarily be unravelled and addressed today.

In the aftermath of the Tsunami, we witnessed the playing out of the caste mindset, the exclusion and discrimination in the course of relief and rehabilitation, and the inherent tendency to recreate the inequalities and hierarchies, including untouchability, therein. It was a revelation that even at a time of disaster, caste-related problems remain; they fester like untreated sores and erupt in different situations to come back and trouble the whole body.

In the Nithari incident 15 out of the 17 children who were victimized belonged to Dalit communities. This again goes to say that even if the perpetrators did not go seeking after Dalit children, their calculations on committing the crime resulted in Dalit children becoming the victims as it is bound to happen. How long can we deny that the caste system leaves sections of our society in an extremely vulnerable position?

The Khairlanji episode was a manifestation of the other end of the caste spectrum. Here one is confronted with the sheer extent of the sadism that is nurtured and perpetuated by the caste system,

without any accountability towards the democratic or legal mechanisms of the country. In the face of such incidents, the need of the hour is to address the caste ethos as a national issue and bring in genuine aspects of democracy, justice and human rights into the system. It is a national task, not something that can be treated as the responsibility of a few people; and a task that needs to be accomplished not just to correct the historical wrongs perpetrated on the Dalit community but as a duty to every single citizen of our nation.

Similar to the caste system, the system of patriarchy inherently excludes, exploits and breeds violence on women across and within castes. The two issues need to be addressed with urgency; efforts must be made to proactively support and promote Dalits and women as part of the national agenda in order to facilitate a model of inclusive growth and development throughout the country.

Dalit Issues Today

Dalit issues have been raised for generations at the local level, and at the national level for almost two centuries now—from the time of Ayyankali and Mahatma Phule. After Ambedkar put forth specific recommendations on the way forward, a new wave of Dalit movements emerged and garnered attention, inspiring the masses at large to recognize and confront the system at various levels. Dalit issues have been raised by the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), and the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in more recent times, linking such issues with similar social systems on a wider plane. The practices of exclusion and discrimination are being increasingly acknowledged as the root causes behind the various forms of social injustice, developmental inequality and conflict. It certainly is time now to address our home-grown caste system in its entirety, treating it as a national problem, one that prevents us from being a genuine secular democracy. I think the Dalit community too is ready for this—a dialogue between Dalits and non-Dalits on how the caste system can be dismantled is the need of the hour.

15

The Contours of My Socialization

K. Babu Joseph

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I was born into a traditional, Catholic-Christian family in Kerala. As a child I attended my parish church along with my parents and relatives and was quite comfortable with the experiences of being identified with a church that was well known and respected in our area. There were also churches belonging to other Christian denominations in the same area, but I visited them only occasionally, for it was generally not the practice to do so.

Besides the churches of different denominations, there were also temples and mosques in the area, but these were less conspicuous as the Christians were the predominant community in terms of the size of their population. On very rare occasions such as their annual feasts, the temples used to organize cultural programmes, which I would attend, but in the case of mosques, it never occurred to me to visit them, as it was not very common for us to do so. Also, unlike the temples and churches, the mosques hardly held any festivities where others could participate.

As a child, it never came to my mind that I belonged to an exclusive group of ancient Indian Christians called the Syrian Christians of the Malabar Coast. All that I knew was that there were churches belonging to Catholics, Jacobites, Knanites (an endogamous group that keeps its own distinctive identity), Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and another that belonged to the Latin rite. I was quite comfortable being a member of the Catholic Church and never felt the need to know other Christian denominations in the neighbourhood. I knew most of these churches only from the outside since I hardly ever visited them, for reasons that I am not sure of except that I shared the views of the elders in my family who did not show any interest in visiting these churches or participating in the faiths they stood for. On the social front, however, there were interactions with the members of all these churches; but then it wasn't anything noteworthy as such social niceties were expressed with people of other religions as well.

The Syrian Christians of the Malabar Coast claim to have lineage to the seven Brahmin families that were believed to have been baptized by St Thomas—one of the disciples of Jesus Christ—who is said to have arrived on the Malabar Coast in AD 72. Although one may not find any written documents to prove the claims of the Syrian Christians, there exists a strong traditional belief to this end, and the same is reinforced by the existence of a tomb believed to be that of St Thomas at Mylapore (near Chennai) in Tamil Nadu.

The Syrian Christians carried on with their religious beliefs and practices for a long time without any serious interference from anyone. With a few exceptions, the Hindu kings were quite benevolent and allowed the Christians to establish themselves socially, economically and even politically. The Syrian Christian community was once very strong in the now defunct port town of Muzirus (Kodungalloor). The port town faced a natural decline when the Christians migrated to Kottayam and to other parts of the coastal land. In fact, the Syrian Christian community was invited to Trichur by the then local king to begin trade and commerce. From a small presence of a few hundred, the Christians who had migrated to Trichur centuries ago have now grown into a strong community of half a million.

Belonging to the Syrian Christian community had its distinctive advantages. I belonged to an ancient landed family that depended on farm labourers for cultivation. Most of the labourers came from other religious communities, and from the Pulaya and Paraya (the Scheduled Castes as per the government's classification, or Dalits as they are popularly known) communities in particular. There would be a few Christian labourers as well.

The farm labourers were mostly landless, and if they had any, it would just be nominal holdings—small and thoroughly inadequate to sustain them. This meant that such people had to depend on the landed to earn their livelihoods. In addition to working on the farms they were available for household chores, and this would earn them additional income, in most cases, in kind. Those who were thus attached to our family were looked after well. The family took care of their food, clothing and medication but rarely looked into their education, since these groups of people did not believe in sending their children to school, nor did others consider it necessary. It was viewed as normal for the children of farm labourers to train in the same profession, and for that schooling was not thought of as essential.

If this was the story in the 1960s, things have changed since then. The successive elected communist governments in Kerala brought in land reforms through which the landless labourers were given rights of tenancy. This move of the government coupled with the efforts of social reformers revolutionized the social and economic profile of the Dalit communities that had until then been under the patronage of the landlords, many of whom were Syrian Christians. The Dalits began to avail of the education facilities offered by the state as well as private schools mostly owned and administered by the Christian community. In fact, it was the Christian community in Kerala that took the initiative to open schools inside the premises of the churches that were popularly called *Pallikkudam*. This was a significant departure from the traditional *gurukula* system that was practiced in Kerala and where the Christians too learned languages, martial arts and other skills.

As a direct consequence of the Dalits receiving education—the Christian education institutions had played a significant role in extending education to all sections of society—they began to move away

from their traditional occupations to other more skilled professions, including white-collar jobs. Not only did they join the mainstream employment market but also got actively engaged in the political process, chiefly promoted by the left political parties. They got better organized by forming trade unions. And with political patronage, the Dalits began to assert themselves for their rights, of equality and acceptance in society. All these movements brought about a social revolution in Kerala within a span of 40 years.

Caught in the currents of the land reforms, the traditional Syrian Christian communities also had to part with some of their ancestral lands, but then they began to migrate to new areas that were hitherto uninhabited. This phenomenon was not limited to the Syrian Christians; other communities that had had to part with their lands in favour of their tenants also partook of such migrations. In addition to such planned migrations, the Syrian Christian community also began to educate their members and this gave them an explicit advantage over others in the service sector. Those educated in the early years were easily absorbed in the job market not just in Kerala but in other parts of India as well: the literacy rate was still awfully low across the rest of India.

The Syrian Christian community, however, maintained its distinctiveness by limiting its social interactions with other communities, especially the lower castes. As a child I felt more comfortable socializing with high-caste Hindus than with Dalits, for I knew well that any attempts to mingle with the latter would have brought me disapproval from my elders. The elders in my family more often than not defined the scope of my social interaction, and any deviation from that would be considered less than acceptable. And if anyone defied those norms of social interaction, he/she would have to face the ire of the rest of family and even other community members.

The social exclusiveness of the Syrian Christian community became quite evident to me when a distant relative of mine decided to marry someone from another religious community. All hell broke loose when she announced to the family that she intended to marry a high-caste (Brahmin) boy. No one in her family was willing to accept the fact that she could make an independent decision about something so personal to her life. Despite strong opposition from her relatives, however, she persisted with her decision and married the boy, but then it cost her her mooring with the family forever.

Things have changed since then. With the increased migration of the Syrian Christians to distant places all over the world, their attitudes towards the aspect of social exclusiveness have also undergone drastic changes. Although there is still a palpable desire among a good number of them to safeguard their traditional social position, life in the globalized world does not afford them such a luxury; they are drawn into the currents of inter-racial, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages just like every other community.

As long as I lived in Kerala I enjoyed the deliberately crafted social comfort-zone that is available to a member of the Syrian Christian community, but things changed beyond recognition when I moved out to other Indian states. After my basic schooling I came to Madhya Pradesh for further studies and to train at a religious institute. It was there that I became more conscious of my distinctive cultural, social, religious and ethnic identity in the midst of a set of people who came from very diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Although initially hesitant to let go of my social biases, I went on to do so

and discovered noble and beautiful elements in other cultures as well. In a matter of a few years, I discovered myself in the fusion of my culture with that of others.

While I was coming to terms with the various cultural territories around me, the concept of caste continued to elude my consciousness. It did not strike me as important since I had never experienced it from within. For one thing, as a Syrian Christian, I had never experienced discriminatory social exclusion; it was just a problem that others faced or so I thought. As a result, I did not pay much attention to the anguish of others who had been subjected to caste-based discrimination; I felt quite at home with my social position, entrenched as I was among the well-accepted higher castes.

My sense of esteem, born out of the social privileges I enjoyed, was reinforced when I began to live and interact with people of other cultures, especially those coming from the socially oppressed groups. I could easily find myself brimming with confidence and satisfaction when I compared my social, economic and religious situation and upbringing with that of the others with me. Indeed many of them came from very humble social and economic backgrounds, so much so that it would take them a long time to muster enough courage to feel secure in my presence. I honestly felt strange about their customs and manners, their languages and priorities. At the same time I was also keen to learn more about these people who were so different from me.

Living in the northern part of the country for the first time did not bring me much enthusiasm for more reasons than one. First of all a city like Indore in Madhya Pradesh in the late 70s was still far removed from anything that could be considered a developed place. At best one could describe it as a functioning anarchy: crammed streets, crowded market places and obsolete vehicles were a common sight in those days. Secondly, slums and squalor abounded everywhere one cared to look, and the streets were full of people who belonged nowhere but to the very last rungs of the social ladder. Such experiences in north India left hardly any pleasant memories within me, but then I consoled myself saying that I had made a conscious choice to come out of my social milieu for a greater religious cause.

My first serious brush with the caste question was when I was studying in a college in Mysore, Karnataka. During one of the summer camps in a rural area, I joined a group that had chosen to work in a small village on the border between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The village was inhabited by not more than a couple of thousand people of different castes. The caste equations were quite conspicuous from the way the village clusters had been designed: the high castes had their houses in the inner circle of the village while the lower castes were on its periphery. And the lower castes were mostly landless labourers working on the farms of the high-caste land-owners.

While I was there with a group of fellow students, I joined in the voluntary work of repairing an existing road to the village. It was a narrow and unlevelled approach road, and our group decided to spend the time in the village making its only approach road a bit better. We started the work in all earnestness in the scorching summer heat. We solicited the cooperation of the villagers, but except a couple of them, no one was willing to soil their hands; they preferred to be mere spectators. Such an indifferent attitude of the villagers intrigued all of us, but we carried on with our assumed task.

One evening, after a gruelling day of work, I was looking around for a place to take a bath. The villagers had no bathrooms in their houses and mostly bathed in the open. I too decided to follow

their example, albeit slightly reluctantly, and began my search for a well from which I could draw some water. After some effort, I discovered a well at a distance from the village and decided to draw water from it. When I reached the well, I saw that it had very little water—it wasn't unusual for wells to dry up in the summers—and I had to literally climb down to the bottom of the well to reach it. No sooner had I begun to draw water than the women folk of the village were at the well screaming and yelling at me. I was totally perplexed at what was going on and I asked them in my broken Kannada whether I did something terribly wrong. They yelled back saying, 'What caste are you?' On the spur of a moment I replied, 'Brahmin.' An eerie silence followed, and the women retreated from there.

It took me a while before I regained my composure and asked myself: What had made me say that I was a Brahmin? Was it just a spontaneous response born out of a survival instinct or was it a resurfacing of a collective imagery tucked away in the recesses of my unconscious, as Carl Jung would say? Whatever the reason behind my instantaneous response, it had saved the day for me. In fact, it was the first instance when someone had asked for my caste identity, and it took me several days before I could come to terms with that particular question.

As a Syrian Christian I had never been quizzed about my caste. Nor was I ever perturbed about it, probably because I enjoyed the unquestioned social acceptance accorded to the Syrian Christians in Kerala. However, my experiences outside Kerala and my interactions with people from other states who were acutely conscious of their caste equations compelled me to think and study about the caste conundrum in India. So strong was their obsession with caste, they could easily identify a person's caste even from the place of his birth.

My life in the northern part of the country where caste has tremendous bearing on one's social and political life brought me closer to the realities of the caste system. I saw the travails of people who were allegedly of lower castes: they seemed to have no rights, and suffered untold humiliation and violence in the hands of the socially dominant upper castes.

Once I was travelling by bus in one of the northern states. When I boarded the bus there were many empty seats and I took a seat. After half an hour or so, the bus halted at a station and more passengers came on board. Most of those who boarded the bus found seats for themselves, but some kept standing even though there were seats available. So I signalled to some of those who were standing to occupy the empty seats in front of me but they would not do so; they preferred sitting on the floor of the bus. I asked my fellow passenger about this strange behaviour, and he told me that these people belonged to the low castes, and that they would not share a seat with someone from a higher caste.

The episode left me with a deep sense of resentment because I felt that what was being perpetrated and condoned was plain injustice and discrimination against some sections of society. The so-called low castes had paid the same bus fare as others had and yet their rights were not on par with that of the others. Although I was aghast at the shameless discrimination of my fellow citizens in the name of caste, I did not protest loudly then since it was a strange place for me; I presumed that people in that part of the country accepted such unjust treatments as 'normal'. Or they simply did not have the courage to be assertive about their rights.

My being a Syrian Christian in north India hardly made any noticeable difference to the people there, as they were not well informed of the different cultural groups of south India. For the people of

the north, those from the southern states were all clubbed together as '*Madrasi*', meaning 'the people of Madras'—now known as Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. This misunderstanding was partly due to the historical fact that the British had a Madras Presidency under which was placed the administrative allegiance of all the southern states. But the scenario has changed in recent years, with people today far better informed about the socio-cultural distinctiveness of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Moreover, with the increasing mobility of people for education and employment throughout India there has emerged a better understanding of the cultural and religious diversity of the country. More than ever before one can now find north Indians in the south and vice-versa, and this has presented Indians with a great opportunity to better appreciate and accept the diverse cultures and religions that make up India. Some years back, Ganesh Chathurti and Deepavali were practically unknown in the South, but now they are being observed. Similarly, an Orthodox Christian religious procession was a rarity in North India, but now it has become a common sight in Delhi and other places in the North.

Such increased social visibility has given rise to a better understanding and even appreciation of the Syrian Christians in the North. And, at least among those well informed of Indian history, the antiquity of Kerala's Syrian Christians is being gradually acknowledged as an integral part of Indian heritage.

My being a Syrian Christian from Kerala and thereby allegedly belonging to a high caste became the focus, though not overtly but in a very subtle manner, when I once appeared for a TV interview on the significance of Christmas. It was a live show done by a channel dedicated to promoting the Hindu religious teachings, and it must have looked odd to see a Christian on the channel speaking about a Christian festival. The discomfiture among the staff was quite conspicuous but since none other than the editor himself had invited me, they had very little choice than to extend their hospitality to me.

That odd feeling got verbalized when the anchor, before the actual show began, asked me in a very subdued voice, 'Sir, when were you converted to Christianity?' It became clear to me that he thought I was from somewhere in the North where the history of Christianity is not more than 150 years old. He was in for a surprise when I told him that my ancestors had accepted Christianity more than a thousand years ago in that part of India from where Sri Shankaracharya, the great Hindu thinker and reformer, began his mission of strengthening Hinduism in India. And when he quizzed me further about my knowledge of Sri Shankaracharya, I chanted a couple of verses (*Mahavakyas*) from his teachings, and that had an electrifying effect on him. Then he knew for sure that I was rather well-informed of the Hindu philosophy and scriptures. From that point onwards, his attitude towards me changed beyond recognition: he turned extremely courteous and treated me as a respectable Indian, no matter that I was a Christian who functioned as the spokesperson of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the apex body of the Catholic Church in India.

On that occasion, I had managed to clarify for the benefit of my Hindu friend from the media that I belonged to something known as the Syrian Christian community, one that stood on par with the higher caste Hindu communities of Kerala. In more ways than one, caste is ingrained in the Indian psyche and is palpable in personal relations, social interactions, religious rituals, political alignments and economic planning. It may be subtle in expression in urban areas owing to the many factors that come

into play in such settings, but it is still quite conspicuous in rural areas where life is pretty much shaped by one's caste affiliation rather than anything else. All other identities get subsumed under the caste identity, and that is how caste identities in India have come to be perpetuated for several millennia.

My experiences of social demarcation have made me a strong believer in the principle of social democracy. I consider that all human beings are born with some potential, which can find its fullest expression only in a congenial social environment. But often under the guise of caste such opportunities are curtailed or even totally erased. It is against this manner of social exclusion that I protest as loudly as possible. And only when we can ensure a kind and hospitable social environment can we truly partake of the ancient Indian wisdom that says *Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavantu* (Let all beings in the world be happy).

16

My Experience of Caste and Race

Gail Omvedt

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It was when I was living in Pune, doing research for my Ph.D., that I first encountered the racism behind the Indian caste system. I had gone with a young Brahmin research assistant to meet Laxmanshastri Joshi, a kind of philosopher and Congress 'pundit'. We had a pleasant talk, but afterwards the boy remarked that it seemed strange to see a smart man with a Congress cap. Why
'Well, the Jan Sangh and the Left are the "smart" parties.'

But why was that?

Here I dragged up some of my newly acquired knowledge of India. Congress in Maharashtra by then had acquired a thoroughly 'bahujan' character, dominated by Maratha-Kunbis and OBCs. 'Is it because the Brahmins are in Jan Sangh and the Left?' 'Yes,' he replied.

'You mean only Brahmins are smart?'

'Well… yes.'

'But how is that possible?'

'They have differently shaped heads, you know!!'

This was 19th century 'anthropology' talking. For that was when many British officials and census takers had gone around measuring people's heads to determine ethnic identities, presuming the physical attributes of the head were in some way related to their owners' actual qualities. Such views of the differences between human beings had produced nice, artistic depictions of the various stages of 'man', in which the 'Negro' was somehow always placed closest to the ape. The incident involving the research assistant was an example of how racism thrived in modern Indian society, under the guise and sanction of the caste system.

This was no confrontation with an atrocity; nor was it akin to hearing the over-whelming accounts of discrimination that the Shudras and Dalits had faced in India. Yet it was revealing of the mind-set that lay behind atrocities. 'These people' are not quite human … Or, they are not equally human. The

whole rhetoric of the reservations controversy, especially the 'reservations versus merit' debate, implied that somehow the upper castes who dominated everywhere and especially in the intellectual fields did so because they deserved it, because they were qualitatively different, and because they had 'merit' while others were backward and needed their help. Gandhism, which had been so strong in India, also implied helping the 'weak'. Sociology courses in India instead of teaching about social stratification—that is, a social system that, by design, kept some people on top and the others far down near the bottom—taught content on the 'weaker sections'. Again, the whole rhetoric implied that these were specific groups that needed help not because they were being discriminated against but because they were less strong, less qualified, and weaker in all respects. Further, the 'Gandhian' rhetoric that urged compassion for those lesser than oneself, too, justified seeing the heavily exploited as different, and somehow deserving of their position.

The racism behind caste was something quite familiar to me. When I came to India to do my Ph.D. research in 1970–71, it was out of the tumult and inspiration of the radical anti-war and civil rights movements in the USA. I had studied for my degree at the University of California in Berkeley, a centre of such radicalism. We had taken part in sit-ins, engaged in confrontations with the police, and withstood our share of tear-gas-related experiences. At one point, I and a friend who was interested in social work decided to work with the Black youth in Berkeley. We met in the hall of a local church in the 'poor' area of Berkeley (not nearly as poor and militant as nearby Oakland or San Francisco across the Bay, but clearly marked off from the University area and the 'Berkeley hills', the rich area). We started out raising funds by organizing 'parties' among professors and other residents of the hills, during which the boys came and told fantastic stories of how angry the young people were, and how close they were to open revolt. Well, those were the days of urban uprisings and a growing, militant Black movement. In nearby Oakland, the Black Panthers had been born; organized by students at a Black college in the town, the Panthers took up guns and followed the police around, patrolling the ghettos against official atrocities. People were ready to believe us, and donated at least modest funds. We managed to start a small programme, out of organizing dances and other get-togethers.

I spent some time working with the Black youth in Berkeley and getting to know some of the other 'gangs' around, in the state capital of Sacramento and elsewhere. Unlike the Black Panthers in nearby Oakland, the Berkeley Black kids were not gun-wielders, but through them we met a number of Black organizers and one real gang—a group in Sacramento, who 'hung out' in an area called Oak Park, which the police normally did not dare to enter except in very large numbers.

Those were the days of Berkeley's glory—white hippies and 'street people', and grass (marijuana), marking the parties and even the anti-war demonstrations with an atmosphere of celebration. One organizer in Sacramento, George Cheong (a half-Black, half-Chinese from Philadelphia) and a young gang leader, Charles, used to visit us and the Berkeley group, and we would walk down the streets of Berkeley, talking of war, peace and revolution.

The Sacramento kids were street fighters. In those days of urban rioting they would normally fight the police. As Charles explained, the girls would be out in front facing the police, while the guys would run around the back in small groups, setting fires and causing all kinds of trouble.

'Charles, how many days do you think you could hold out against the police?' I once asked him

quite seriously. We had been discussing the Vietnamese struggle. 'Well,' he replied, 'There's the Sacramento Police, and the State Highway Patrol, and the San Francisco City Police.' And so on, we went about naming at least five different police forces (and in contrast to India, all of these were armed police, even the University Police).

'We could hold out a week,' he concluded, 'No more.'

So I was no stranger to anti-racist militancy when I came to India, and it easily translated into an understanding of anti-caste militancy. The Dalit Panthers had just been formed, named after the Black Panthers. There was a conflict over their manifesto. At that time, it was said to have been actually written by a young Naxalite. Self-styled Ambedkarites' (the Raja Dhale group) were flexing their muscle against the 'Marxists' (the Namdev Dhasal group). But, as one young ghetto militant put it, 'We didn't know what was in the manifesto. All we knew was—if someone lays his hand on your sister, cut it off!'

It was easy for me to see the parallels between caste and race, which were to be brought to the fore as part of the Dalit movement only decades later, at the UN Conference against Racism in 2001. In 1970, fresh from the experience of the Civil Rights movement, the gang wars and the tumult raging throughout the US on the issue of race, it was an obvious comparison for me to make.

Take, for example, the question of atrocities. In race relations, the greatest 'crime' a Black man could commit would be to be accused of looking at a white woman; this had been the reason for an untold number of lynchings in the past. 'Would you want your daughter to marry one?' was the most potent of psychological appeals to innate racist feelings. In India, too, so many atrocities in the villages and city slums had as their basic cause the fact that a Dalit boy and a caste Hindu girl had fallen for each other. While Arundhati Roy was the first to memorialize this theme in *God of Small Things*, India has had a long history of such brutality perpetrated by its 'guardians' of social order. Crucial to caste as well as race was the rule that there must be no intermarriage. There may have been different justifications, but the imposition was there in both cases.

Partly as a result, another sexual dialectic was in operation by the time the Dalit and Black assertions had taken the form of strong social movements. Young upwardly mobile Dalit and Black men tended to look for Brahmin/White wives. There were several reasons: one, 'tasting of forbidden fruit'—what had been anathema in the past looked good; it represented a challenge; a barrier to overcome; unlike other barriers, this was the one that was most deeply and personally felt. There was also the fact that in terms of education Black women and, even more, Dalit women lagged behind their counterparts in the White/Upper caste communities. It was perhaps an inevitable relationship: when the barriers of race and caste fall, they have to fall at all levels, from the personal to the political.

However, both in the USA and India, this led to discontent at a community level. Black women did not like their talented men 'marrying out'. Neither did Dalit women. It was argued that this was a part of a Brahminization process, this leaving the community. Over the course of time, Americans have grown used to the idea that a Black identity—nowadays referred to as an 'African American' identity—is not such a negative thing.

But, the 'Black is beautiful' credo never really had an Indian equivalent. One of my principal

observations on casteism vis-à-vis racism is that the Dalits were not anywhere near as aggressive as the Blacks of America. Most seemed uncertain of themselves, ever ready to try and blend into a society tailor-made for caste Hindus. Unfortunately, very few could pull it off.

Thus, the Dalits and the Blacks had different identity issues. The US African Americans are easily recognizable; even if they are light-skinned, they are bound to stand out. Thus their identity is inextricable; it is tied to their bodies, their very image. And by the 1960s, they were taking advantage of this, turning it into an asset. Blacks had for decades evolved their own style—and they were finally becoming style leaders. In the 1960s, the 'natural' hairstyle had come into vogue. Blacks took their naturally frizzy, sharply curly hair and turned it into a positive feature, making large 'caps' of hair stand out of their heads. (Later, by the 1990s, this would lead to the 'corn rows', neatly braided rows of hair). All of this was sharply distinctive, and beyond the ability of all but a few whites to imitate. Blacks were using their clothes, their posture, their language, and every other tool at their disposal to make a proud social statement. I saw nothing of this kind among the Dalits of India. Maybe it was because they could blend into Indian society far easier than Blacks could in America. In India, whatever the 'racial' images in people's minds, there is really no way to tell the caste of someone you meet. True, there is a broad linkage between colour and caste: higher caste people tend to be lighter skinned, and some castes of Brahmins (for instance, the Konkanasthas in Maharashtra; a number of them have hazel eyes) stand out by way of appearance. But this is only a broad correlation, liable to afford millions of exceptions. To tell someone's caste, one has to make inquiries. Of course, Indians did so, but this meant that it was easier for Dalits to pass. In the USA, only very rarely will a White be able to pass as a Black, and vice versa. Dalits could do it all the time, at least in fairly public places. But this had disadvantages as well. It meant that there was relatively less pressure to build up a really powerful self-image; resistance wasn't always essential since one always had the option of simply melting into the crowd.

And finally, I have the feeling that in India, somehow, the extent of mental slavery of the oppressed has been greater. As I learned more about Ambedkar and Phule, it seemed to me that the difference in India was that such mental slavery had religious sanction. In the USA, on the contrary, while racism may have taken horrible forms, it had never been justified by the basic tenets of Christianity. My Dalit—Christian friends are also of a similar opinion. Brahminism was different. The Varnashrama dharma was sanctioned in the ancient scriptures—in the *Rig Veda*, among others, and in the *Bhagavad Gita* as well. This had soaked into the atmosphere; even Buddhists had problems of escaping it. Perhaps as a result, I always found Dalits less inclined to be aggressive. Even though there were some 'ghetto riots' they were involved in, there were more often—as in Marathwada in 1978—wide-scale, violent pogroms against them, and not by them. In the USA, today, lynchings are a thing of the past what with racism was taking on more subtle forms. In India, however, violence still erupts in the name of caste, and incidents such as the one in Khairlanji continue to tarnish Dalit—caste Hindu relations.

17

The Indian Caste System and Dalit Repression

Omprakash Valmiki

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The problem of caste in India is a very complex matter; having developed over three thousand years, caste has spread its tentacles in all areas of life. It determines social relations at each and every step, and yet the supporters of the caste system denounce any discussion of caste as a stand against religion and culture. They deny its existence when you raise the issue, and, in fact, claim that caste is now a thing of the past: that to talk of it in this day and age is to poison the social atmosphere and spread hatred, they maintain. However, it is those who deny caste that are poisoning society and spreading hatred, at times deliberately and at others in ignorance. In fact, caste is so deep-rooted in the social order that it has become commonplace, and has an impact on each aspect of our day-to-day lives.

The 'seed' of casteism is sown into the minds of children by their families. Even today, school-going children, for instance, are instructed to stay away from Dalit children.

The Buddha was the first to protest against this hegemony. He struck a telling blow at the caste system by offering an alternative way of life in the Buddhist *viharas*. After Buddha, various social movements—mass-scale conversions from Hinduism to other religions, migrations in great numbers from the villages to the urban centres, the embrace by large sections of the population of an alternative, indigenous identity, etc.—have had but a minor impact on the breadth and depth of the caste system. This is because the caste system is closely tied to the control of resources and the politics of social hegemony.

While Gandhi supported the eradication of the caste system and the abolition of the practice of untouchability, he considered the *varnashram* to be India's incomparable gift to world civilization. In the 6 March 1937 issue of the *Harijan*, he wrote:

> What I mean is, one born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes. For a scavenger is as worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your president. That according to me is Hinduism. There is no better Communism on earth. Varnashram Dharma acts even as the law of gravitation. The law of Varna is the antithesis of

competition which kills.[1]

This statement of Gandhi is a major beam in the edifice of the caste system. He turns a blind eye towards the inequality, suffering, and oppression caused by the system. As Gail Omvedt says, 'The point is that Gandhi, who feared a "political division … in the villages", ignored the division that already existed; in his warning against the spread of violence, he ignored the violence already existing in the lives of the Dalits.'[2]

The Definition of Caste

M. N. Srinivas says that 'Caste in India is hereditary, endogamous, and usually in the form of a localized group having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of caste. Relationships between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity and generally, maximum commensality occurs within a caste.'[3]

One of the fundamental principles of the caste system is that it ascribes a status to human beings on the basis of their birth. That is why the Brahmin is at the top of the pyramid and the rest are beneath the Brahmin. An individual's place on this pyramid, ascertained on the basis of his/her birth, determines the nature of his/her occupation. A strict ban on exogamy is essential for the upkeep of the caste order. Deeply oppressive rules were created to dampen rebellion and maintain the invincibility of this system. Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt suggest:

> … the *ideology of caste* [is] based on notions of purity and pollution, hereditary transmission of qualities and [is] ultimately sanctioned by religious notions of service to and exchange with the gods. In terms of this ideology, the bottom level [comprising] artisans and service workers was seen as *untouchable* due to the polluting nature of their work, such as handling leather, removing dead cattle from village grounds, roles in death and funeral ceremonies, etc. Thus the kinship groups, which performed these tasks, were defined as untouchable or impure castes and were generally forced to live in hutment settlements that were close to but officially outside the 'village' proper as seen by its other inhabitants.[4]

Caste, then, is not just about social division but a whole way of life, incorporating rules about diet, education, marriage, sociality and worship. Caste is religion, and not just a means of social classification.

The Dalits are called the Scheduled Castes in the official lexicon. Their population is 16 per cent of India's total population. If we were to also include those who converted to Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism in order to escape caste-based oppression, then the Dalits would constitute 20 per cent of the country's total population. This 20 per cent—that is, two hundred million people—are being oppressed, simply because of the accident of their birth. The subjugation they face is merciless and it deprives them of their basic human rights. They live in separate colonies, draw water from separate wells, worship in separate places of worship and bury or cremate their dead in separate burial grounds or crematoria. Untouchability assails them both in their personal and social lives even though the Constitution of India bans it categorically and demands its total eradication. The reason untouchability still exists in India, despite such proclamations, is because caste-based discrimination is not just a social phenomenon but also has religious sanction.

Commenting on these social realities, Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes: 'In rural areas Dalits

continue to face physical violence, including mass killings and rapes, by vigilante groups established and operated by high-caste landowners when they ask for fair wages and freedom from molestation. The authorities seldom apprehend and punish the perpetrators of such violence.'[5]

During the last few years, the government has been providing mid-day meals to school children. The aim of this scheme was to get children interested in studies and to increase the number of children attending schools, especially in the rural areas. In implementing this scheme, however, the deep-seated casteism underlying the Indian social structure has also been pitifully exposed. We need to examine how caste-based discrimination blights this scheme:

1. The guardians of upper-caste children have objected to seating their children with those of Dalits for the mid-day meal. As a result, upper-caste and Dalit children sit separately at meal time.
2. The women who cook the mid-day meal are hired on the basis of caste. Upper-caste children do not eat food cooked by Dalit women.
3. The Dalit children are discriminated against even while they eat. It is assumed that these children don't need to be sheltered from the sun or the rain because they are used to such conditions.

The District Magistrate of Pithoragarh in Uttarakhand ordered an inquiry into several complaints about discrimination against Dalit children involving the mid-day meal scheme as well as instances of boycott by high-caste children of food cooked by Dalit women. Reports of segregation of Dalit children at meal time were filed from Chaupata village in the Do Bans region and from Umargada School in Muniari. When a Dalit woman was hired to cook the mid-day meal at Kurila Primary School in Dharchula, the *savarna* children refused to eat. The officiating civil servant then appointed a *savarna* woman as cook. From this, we can see that the Dalits in India face a type of discrimination that is different from the one experienced by the Blacks and other people of colour in the West. The Blacks were never deemed untouchables. Untouchability is far more lethal than slavery. It would be useful to recall Dr Ambedkar's words in this regard:

> The slave status carried no stigma on the man in the society. He was touchable and even respectable.… Untouchability is worse than slavery because a slave has a personality [within] society, while the untouchable has no personality.… Untouchability is worse than slavery because it carries no such security as to livelihood as the latter does. No one is responsible for the feeding, housing and clothing of untouchables. From this point of view untouchability is not only worse than slavery but is positively cruel as compared to slavery. The second or rather the third difference between untouchability and slavery is that slavery was never obligatory. But untouchability is obliged.[6]

In order to understand the workings of untouchability in Indian society, it is necessary to examine the Hindu life as lived in the villages. There is no better guide here than Dr Ambedkar who put the Hindu rural life under a microscope:

> Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing. The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organization to which he believes there is no parallel anywhere in the world. It is claimed to be a special contribution to the theory of social organization for which India may well be proud of.[7]

Indian literature, whether in Sanskrit or Hindi, has a tremendous love for rural life. It never tires of singing praises of the rural life, but from a Dalit perspective, village life is virtual hell. Every upper-caste Hindu, however, firmly believes that Indian villages are the ideal of social harmony. While discussing the draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly, its Hindu members had demanded that

the Constitution recognize the village as the base of the constitutional pyramid of autonomous administrative units, granting every village its own legislature, executive and judiciary. We need to thank the Constituent Assembly for not agreeing to the proposal as it would have unleashed a terrible calamity on the Dalits.

Some people claim that caste is no longer a problem. They refuse to acknowledge the stories of atrocities against Dalits that are printed every day in the newspapers. These daily occurrences demonstrate that orthodoxy and a feudal mindset are endemic across the length and breadth of the nation. Democracy is merely a window-dressing.

Recently, a survey was published about untouchability in rural India. This survey was conducted during 2001–2002 in eleven states and across 565 districts. Its findings are highly alarming. In 19 per cent of the villages covered, Dalits are not permitted to wear new clothes. In 10 to 17 per cent of the villages, Dalits cannot wear glasses or footwear. Suhasini Ali, in her essay, describes what happened to a little girl who had to fetch water for her family: 'When a ten-year-old Dalit girl, Lata, was drawing water from the well in Mahasamuundram village in district Anantpuram, Andhra Pradesh, Kalavathamma of the landed *Golla* caste also arrived. As Lata hadn't yet finished filling her pots, the Golla woman had to wait a bit. She started screaming abuses at Lata and kicked at her bucket. But the matter did not rest there. Kalavathamma collected her caste members and they declared a *fatwa* against the Dalits, prohibiting them from coming near the well. When Dalits protested against this edict, their *basti* was attacked. Gangamma lodged a complaint with the police but the attackers were not apprehended.'[8]

The same story is repeated in all other aspects of life. Dalits have to struggle continually to get access to basic necessities such as water. In Rajasthan and Haryana, animals can drink water from public lakes but not Dalits. It is this India that Indian writers glorify in their writings. They don't seem interested in portraying Dalit life. Intellectuals and thinkers consider it below their dignity to discuss these matters.

When a Dalit student Neelratan Shende entered his application for the post of treasurer in a college election in Mumbai, his opponents put up posters that said this: 'Does he know how to count from 1 to 10?' If this is the mindset in a modern city like Mumbai, what can one expect from the smaller cities, towns and villages?

Not so long ago, a Dalit wedding party was attacked with sticks (*lathis*) and batons (*dandas*) in Hanera village in Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand, and the bride was thrown to the ground. The *savarnas* maintained that the Dalits could not carry their bride in a *doli* in front of *savarna* houses. It was an insult to tradition, according to them. The district collector Gopal Krishna Dwivedi himself investigated this incident and the culprits were arrested.

Atrocities against Dalits continue to take place despite all efforts to put an end to them. An incident similar to the one in Hanera occurred in Dugarcha village in the Liti region of the Garhwal district, Uttarakhand, when a wedding party from the village of Supi was beaten up and abused by the *savarnas*. The bride's father lodged a complaint with the police wherein he stated that some *savarna* villagers had beaten him up and dragged the bride by her hand, all the while mouthing caste-based invectives. As soon as the wedding party had reached the home of Basanti Devi, the bride to be,

villagers Shyam Singh, Ganga Singh, Shankar Singh, Lakshaman Singh, and Bhupal Singh beat up the *baratis* (members of the wedding party) and poured dirt and gravel in their food. Some people tried to mediate but the miscreants came back on the morning of 18 November 2006 and dragged the bride out of her home onto the street.

A similar, shameful and brutal attack took place in Haryana's Gohana village in Sonepat district on 31 August 2005. This is what *Sahara Samay* wrote in its editorial: 'Only ashes and broken walls are left of fifty houses in Gohana's Valmiki settlement. Mostly janitorial workers lived in this *basti* in Haryana's Sonepat district. All the worldly possessions of the Dalit families were consigned to fire, even the school bags and uniforms of the children. This blaze was started by members of the Jat community. The Jat Panchayat had informed the district administration about their intention to burn down the Valmiki *basti* two days before implementing their decision, but the Haryana police failed to stop them. The burning and looting of Dalit homes was not carried out because of a sudden provocation, but was meticulously planned. The police is calling the arson and looting justifiable based on the fact that it was a ruling of the panchayat.'[9]

The Gohana holocaust is a cruel reminder of the barbarism that is capable of being unleashed from within India's social order. A similar event occurred in Jhajjar, also in Haryana, where five young men were burnt alive while the police did nothing. In fact, the police colluded in this crime.

Haryana's panchayats participate actively in torturing and tormenting Dalits. The local administrations and the country's democratic institutions seem helpless and incapable of confronting these casteist powers; at times, the police and local administration join hands with the perpetrators.

The monsoon season of 2006 wrought terrible destruction in the Barmer and Jaisalmer districts of Rajasthan. Relief camps were set up, but Sumer Meghvanshi and his family were not allowed in because they were Dalits. The rehabilitation programmes shamelessly discriminated against the Dalits. They were chased out of relief camps and denied food and water. They were even prevented from using the toilets in the relief camp. The *savarna* hatred for Dalits became woefully evident when they protested against the digging of drainage channels to let out the flood waters from the Dalit-majority villages of Mava and Kavas.

The treatment of Dalits during the Rajasthan flood disaster is not unique. Dalits are routinely discriminated against in the course of relief and rehabilitation programmes. During the 2004 tsunami, Dalits were driven out of the relief camps in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattam district. Prior to that, in 2001, during the Gujarat earthquake, Dalits and Muslims were denied access to relief measures.[10] The district administrators of Nagapattam district refused to take action against the anti-constitutional behaviour of the *savarnas*. This is the awful face of social hatred that does not recede even in times of natural calamities.

There is a new consciousness among Dalits today owing, in large measure, to the work of Dr Ambedkar. Dalits have made their mark in every field of life, but there are tremendous barriers in their path simply because they were born Dalits. Dalit writer Bhagwan Das says:

> Land-holding, upper-caste people in villages do not allow Dalits to wear decent clothes, cast votes freely, ride on a horse in marriage processions, draw water from a public well, or sit on a cot while an upper-caste man is standing. In cities a student belonging to the Scheduled Castes is purposely given low marks, an officer is prejudged as incompetent and inefficient just

because of his birth in an untouchable caste. A professor, a lawyer, a doctor, or an architect, born in an untouchable family is considered inefficient and inferior without even considering his actual performance. A patient refuses to be treated by a Scheduled Caste doctor and a house owner refuses to let a vacant house to him for the fear of pollution. A superior gives bad reports to a Dalit subordinate in order to obstruct his promotion. In everyday talk in the canteens, buses, trains and airplanes, offices and establishments, aspersions are cast on the men and women of untouchable origin and derogatory remarks are passed. Universities and colleges abusing the power and authority given to 'autonomous bodies' close the doors of progress to students, teachers and employees to protect 'merit'—merit earned with fake certificates, unfair practices in examination, nepotism and corruption.[11]

My Story

My life has passed through similar bitter experiences that have been described above. When I remember what I endured to obtain primary education, I still cannot bear it. My memories of my teachers are deeply hurtful and I have described that chapter of my life in detail in my autobiography *Jhoothan.*[12] I provide some excerpts from *Jhoothan* below:

The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood has remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, I remember all the teachers who, I knew, used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them.

One day the headmaster Kaliram called me to his room and asked: 'Abey, what is your name?'

'Omprakash,' I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel scared just to come across the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him.

'Chuhre ka?' The headmaster threw his second question at me.

'Ji.'

'All right … See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.

Go … get to it.'

Obeying the headmaster's orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandas. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said, 'After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground.'

The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and there I was sweeping. The headmaster was sitting in his room, watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers.

The second day, as soon as I reached school, the headmaster again put me to the task of sweeping the school. I swept the whole day, consoling myself that I would be back in class from the next day onwards.

On the third day I went to my class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes, the headmaster's thunderous voice was heard: 'Abe Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding … your mother … '

I had begun to shake uncontrollably. A Tyagi boy shouted, 'Master Saheb, there he is, sitting in the corner.'

The headmaster had caught hold of my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: 'Go sweep the whole playground … Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of school.'

Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me, it was shedding its dried up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks. I started to sweep the compound through my tears. Through the doors and windows of the schoolrooms, the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle. Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish.

It so happened that my father was just then passing by the school. He stopped abruptly when he saw me sweeping the school compound. He called me, 'Munshiji, what are you doing?' Munshiji was the pet name my father had given me. When I saw him, I burst out sobbing. He entered the school compound and came towards me. Seeing me crying, he asked, 'Munshiji, why are you crying? Tell me, what has happened?'

I was hiccupping by now. Between my hiccups, I told the whole story to my father: that the teachers had been making me sweep for the last three days, that they had not let me enter the classroom at all.

Pitaji snatched the broom from my hand and threw it away. His eyes were blazing. Pitaji who was always taut as a bowstring in front of others was so angry that his dense moustache was fluttering. He began to scream: 'Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?'

Pitaji's voice had echoed throughout the school. All the teachers along with the headmaster came out. Kaliram, the headmaster, threatened my father and called him names. But his threats had no effect on Pitaji. I have never forgotten the courage and the fortitude with which my father confronted the headmaster that day. Pitaji had all sorts of weaknesses, but the decisive turn that he gave my future that day had a great impact on my personality.

The headmaster had roared, 'Take him away from here … The Chuhra wants him educated … Go, go … Otherwise I will have your bones broken.'

Pitaji took my hand and started walking towards our home. As he walked away, he said, loudly enough for the headmaster to hear: 'You are a teacher … So I am leaving now. But remember this much, Master … This Chuhre ka will study right here … In this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him.'[13]

Casteism still prevails in educational institutions and prevents Dalits from developing their talents. I would like to refer to one more episode from my days in school. I was in class eight at that time.

One day, Master Saheb was teaching the lesson on Dronacharya. He told us, almost with tears in his eyes, that Dronacharya had fed flour dissolved in water to his famished son, Ashwatthama, in lieu of milk. The whole class had responded with great emotion to this story of Dronacharya's dire poverty. This episode was penned by Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata* to highlight Drona's poverty. When the import of the lesson had sunk in, I had the temerity to stand up and ask Master Saheb a question. So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink *mar*? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't a poet ever write a word on our lives?

The whole class stared at me, as though I had raised a meaningless point. Master Saheb screamed,

‘Darkest *Kaliyug* has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back.’ The teacher ordered me to stand in the *murga* or rooster pose. This meant squatting on my haunches, then drawing my arms through my inner thighs, and pulling down my head to grasp my ears, a painful constricted position. Instead of carrying on with the lesson he was going on and on about my being a Chuhra. He ordered a boy to get a long teak stick. ‘Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya … Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body.’ True to his word, the teacher with the swishes of his stick created an epic on my back. That epic is still inscribed on my back. It reminds me of those hated days of hunger and hopelessness; that epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back but on each nerve in my brain.

I too have felt inside me the flames of Ashwatthama’s revenge. They keep burning inside me to this day. I have struggled for years on end to come out of the dark vaults of my life, powered by little besides gruel (the rice water). Our stomachs would get bloated because of a constant diet of this drink. It killed our appetite. It was our cow milk and it was our gourmet meal. Scorched by this deprived life, the colour of my skin changed beyond recognition.

Literature can only go as far as imagining hell. But for us, we had to *live* through it; the rainy seasons, in particular, were a living hell. This terrible suffering of village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets of Hindi. What a monstrous truth that is.[14]

Dalit anguish resides in the paradox that despite being born as a human, a Dalit is not allowed to live as a human. The social, economic, religious and cultural structures of the nation have ensured that a Dalit does not receive the rights and opportunities that must accrue to any and all individuals to help them realize their potential as human beings.

The wall of hatred separating Dalits from non-Dalits is thousands of years old. When a Dalit stands up for the sake of his or her self-worth, or wants to move out of the four walls of casteism, s/he is blamed for spreading casteist hatred. Although times have changed, the hatred against Dalits in the *savarnas*’ hearts has not gone away. Why is the Hindu who worships trees and plants and beasts and birds so intolerant of Dalits?

As long as they don’t know that you are a Dalit, everything is fine. The moment they find out about your caste, everything changes. The pain of facing society as a Dalit cuts through the flesh like a knife. A life of poverty and illiteracy, a life broken up and wasted, spent standing outside the door—but will a civilized and prosperous *savarna* Hindu ever understand that?

18

India Shining

Mir Ali Husain

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This is a story about shoe-polish. It could have been a story about many other things as well. For instance, it could have been a story about Balraj and Pochamma. Some 30 years ago, Balraj had knocked on our door and asked if he could leave his wheelbarrow at our place. He lived a long distance away and had to come to our neighbourhood every morning at 5 am, in his capacity as a municipal worker, along with a crew of female sweepers who picked up the trash and deposited it in the wheelbarrow that Balraj pushed. Here was the deal that Balraj offered us. If we kept the wheelbarrow in our courtyard, he wouldn't have to push it back and forth from his home to the cleaning site every day. And in return, we could use it as our trash can. It was, he suggested, a win-win situation. The next day, our door-bell rang at 5 a.m.. Used to a later waking time, we all snuggled deeper into our beds, each hoping that someone else would get up and answer it. Balraj was persistent. When the bell did not do the job, he started banging on the gate until one of us relented. The tableau was repeated the next day and the next and the next. I can't remember a day that I have slept at my Hyderabad home and not been woken up at 5 am by Balraj and his crew (except on Sundays, when it is the turn of the fishmonger). Over time, the ritual has expanded. Now, at the end of their work hours, the whole cleaning crew comes to our house. They use the bathroom and wash up. Then they settle down and open up their lunch boxes to eat. Most of the time, their meal consists of idlis and some red, fiery chutney. Some days there is rice and sambhar. Balraj has now aged considerably. So has Pochamma, the head sweeper. Their bodies are bent over and their bones arthritic. Balraj worries about his children, particularly his eldest son who does not have a stable government job like his father. He too cleans the streets, but is a contracted employee and can be dismissed at a whim. Balraj clings on to an absurdly vain hope that I might one day be able to perform a miracle and get his son—who has no formal education—a job in the USA. I don't know what specific caste Balraj and Pochamma belong to, but I do have a fairly good idea—without

needing to ask—where it lies within the hierarchy. But I digress. My story is not about Balraj or Pochamma or the caste of those who clean our streets or the nature of their diets or their worries about the livelihoods of their children. It is about shoe-polish.

Shoe polish is what scientists might refer to as a colloidal emulsion, which means that it is a heterogeneous mixture of a number of unblendable ingredients such as ethylene glycol, gum arabic, lanolin, naphtha, turpentine, and wax along with something that gives the polish its colour (usually carbon black for black polish). Applying this polish to leather followed by buffing it with a cloth or brush produces a shine. With enough elbow grease and the judicious application of some spit (or a drop of water if you like) the leather can be made to gleam, which is what Satyanarayana did to my shoes when I was a child growing up in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in the old city of Hyderabad. He'd take my battered and scuffed footwear and get to work on them with brush, cloth, polish and wax, and by the time he was done, I could see my reflection in their now-shiny surface.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the *mohallas* in the old city were either mostly Hindu or mostly Muslim, but none of them was exclusively so. However, over time, the communalization of politics and social life has had its influence on the cartography of my hometown. Very few, if any, Muslims now live in Hindu areas, and vice versa. But that's a different tragic tale. There were a few Hindu families that lived in the lanes around my home (most of them continue to live there, but in a sign of our times, no new Hindu family has moved to this neighbourhood in the last 20 years). There were the Jaiswals with whom we shared a common wall. Every day, Lata (my 'rakhi' sister) would come out on her rooftop and lower a basket that was filled with what she had cooked that day. The basket was usually returned with food from our kitchen. Then there were the homes of the Sisodia family, one of them rather unique in that it was coloured in a way that immediately marked it as different from the other houses around and for the large 'Om' that decorated its facade. Then there were the Lahotis, the Agarwals, the Prashads, all living in houses that had accommodated generations of their families.

But these were not the only Hindus who lived in our 'hood. There were others. But they didn't live in old family homes. Nor did they appear to have names. I rarely heard anyone actually refer to them as Mahesh or Sai Anna. Or Satyanarayana. For almost everyone, they were the *dhobi* (the washerman) or the *hajjam* (barber). Or the *mochi* (cobbler). Even as a child, it was quite obvious to me that these families were 'different' from the others. As were Balraj and Pochamma. I heard people refer to them behind their backs as '*dhed*', a term used to refer to a specific group, and deployed in this case to frame all 'backward-caste' Hindus as a generic, and often pejorative, category.

As things went, Mahesh would iron my clothes for school, Sai *anna* would cut my hair once a month (always too short!), and Satyanarayana would polish my frayed shoes till he induced them to take on a sheen or take the broken strap of my sandals, splice on an extension, and sew it back on my footwear using a thread coated with yellow wax.

I had graduated from college a few years before the Mandal report and its attendant drama unfolded. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to the USA to enrol in a Ph.D. programme. I had spent a few years away from Hyderabad, some at college and some while working, and used to visit home only during my vacations. With the disposable income that came with a well-paying corporate job, I no longer felt the need to have the life of my sandals extended (long before the strap came anywhere

close to breaking, I would have bought another pair) or my now-not-so-old shoes polished quite so vigorously (and besides, the new liquid-polish-with-sponge contraptions made it fairly convenient to do it oneself). Nonetheless, I usually visited Satyanarayana to say hello and have a cup of tea with him. One day, I was walking towards his small *malgi* to do just this when a young man called out to me. It had been a long time since I had seen Satyanarayana's son, and so it took me a moment to recognize Mahendar, who was now all grown up and was dressed more than a bit nattily. What transpired next shook me with amazement. Mahendar started speaking to me, and instead of the local Hyderabadi lingua franca that we had always used, he spoke in … flawless English! As he talked to me, I learnt that he had graduated from college with a bachelor's degree and was now doing his M.Sc. in Chemistry at the Banaras Hindu University. He was considering writing his GRE and applying for graduate programmes in the USA and wanted to know what I thought of the Kaplan guides. While we talked, Satyanarayana polished a pair of beaten shoes coaxing a shine onto their reluctant surfaces, and glancing up occasionally at his English-speaking son with unmistakable pride. I had my customary tea with him, congratulated him for his son's achievement, and left.

On the way home, I reflected on my own reaction to Mahendar's English. Why did I respond the way I did, with surprise and disbelief? Why did I experience this dissonance between my expectations of Mahendar and his achievements? I suppose I could excuse myself and my reactions, or at least justify them easily enough. From what I had seen of society thus far, the son of a carpenter became a carpenter, that of a mechanic a mechanic, that of a butcher a butcher, that of a barber a barber, and that of a cobbler a cobbler. Class mobility was hardly a feature of Indian society (nor, as I was to learn later, of the American one). Clearly, Satyanarayana and Mahendar were exceptions. Mahendar had clawed his way out of his seemingly preordained destiny through the diligence of his parents, his own hard work, and the assistance of a system of reservations that pushed educational institutions into taking affirmative action to help the cause of disadvantaged caste groups. Even with all of this, it must have been an excruciatingly difficult process. Without it, it would have been impossible.

My intention here is not to make a case for caste-based reservations, although I must say that I am strongly in their favour, notwithstanding the problems with policies that are based solely on identity rather than on need. I am merely telling a story about shoe-polish, the colloidal emulsion that was to make its way into my life again the following day. The government had announced its decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission and large parts of the country were in turmoil. A protest was being organized in Hyderabad and my friends were going to be a part of it. Before going any further, I should clarify here that while I had urged my friends on that occasion to reflect on the privileges they had received on account of their class (and caste) backgrounds, I also understood their reasons for anxiety. The competition for admissions to educational institutions through the 'open' category was already fierce. If an increase in the reservation quota were to reduce the number of open seats, their opportunities would be corroded further. I did try to argue with them that the opportunities available to the backward castes were even more limited and that they deserved all the assistance they could get, but my friends were in no mood to listen to me. I suppose that it is difficult to even acknowledge privilege, let alone relinquish it.

The form of protest that had been chosen for that day was unique. Several students were planning to gather in front of the Nampally Railway Station and polish shoes. The protestors were hoping that this act of theirs would drive home their point that an increase in reservations would reduce them—the meritocratic cream of society—to shoe polishers. Like the *mochi*. Like Satyanarayana.

Satyanarayana had polished my shoes just as his father had polished the shoes of my parents' generation. His position in the social order had condemned him to a life of menial drudgery that had allowed him to at best eke out a living. And yet, the mimicry carried out by my friends had mocked this man. So, was Satyanarayana *meant* to polish shoes for a living? Was that his calling in the social order? Or was that simply part of his just dues for a lack of knowledge, of expertise, and education—an unfortunate consequence of his personal failure to hack it in a meritocratic world? The phrase that was bandied about a lot in those days was 'equality of opportunity'. It was unfair, the argument went, to deprive a capable student of a seat in a college merely to hand it to someone who had got lower scores on his admission test but had had the 'good fortune' to be born as a backward caste individual. What eluded many was the meaninglessness of an 'equality of opportunity' in an environment where the 'opportunity of equality' was absent—the insignificance of meritocracy in a society where one's class position was determined by one's inheritance of property and privilege, and therefore by the mere accident of birth.

The passage of time has not brought us any closer, as a community, to comprehending this basic fact. When the issue of reservations for OBCs in central educational institutions was raised in 2006, the agitators were back on the streets. Medical students and doctors of the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences were rehashing the shoe-polishing protest. This time, they were sweeping the streets.

I was visiting Hyderabad that summer. I stayed up late one night in the company of my friends, many of whom had polished shoes 16 years ago to voice their own protest. All of them had done very well for themselves in the post-liberalization era; most drove home that night in air-conditioned cars to sleep away the hot night in air-conditioned bedrooms. I was in deep slumber the following morning when, at 5 am, the door-bell rang. Not wanting my mother to have to get up, I forced myself out of bed and opened the gate, and waited impatiently while Balraj and Pochamma gathered their brooms and pushed the wheelbarrow out for another tryst with their Sisyphean destiny. I went back to bed and woke up later to the sound of the ablutions of the cleaning crew. As I walked to my bathroom, I saw the same scene that I had first seen some thirty years ago. Balraj and Pochamma were sitting on their haunches, eating. Their tin boxes held idlis and a fiery-red chutney. And their feet, thirty years later, were still bare.

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My Experiments with Hunting Rats

Chandra Bhan Prasad

Chandra Bhan Prasad is a columnist and intellectual crusader. A self-trained social psychologist, he obtained a Master's degree in political science and an M.Phil. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He writes a weekly column, 'Dalit Diary' in The Pioneer. *National and international media seek his views on matters related to the Dalits, social justice and other socio-political matters. He is also passionate about promoting English language among Dalits. He has just finished a seminal research on changes in lifestyle and food habits among Dalits in Uttar Pradesh; another study underway is on entrepreneurship among Dalits (both sponsored by the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania).*

I am Chandra Bhan Prasad, a self-trained anthropologist and social psychologist. I was born circa 1960 in *this* house. This house has a story. Built on an area of 6000 sq. ft., its construction began a couple of years before Germany invaded Poland. The inner mud walls of the house are 36 inches thick. The outer walls are brick-made. In those days, most *pukka* houses would have mud walls inside, and brick walls outside. About a half a decade might have gone by in planning the house and in tackling the various controversies that the very idea of the house had generated before actual construction began.

Although we had enough money to make the house, there were several constraints, both logistical and social. At that time in my part of eastern Uttar Pradesh—before the start of World War II—bricks were rarely commercially sold. To make a brick house, therefore, one needed to create a make-shift brick kiln. That required not only a decent disposable income but also a lot of patience.

Around the year 1932, my uncle Indrajeet secured a job with the railways in Burma. After trying his luck in Dhaka (then Decca, in East Bengal), Indrajeet joined the railways in Burma as a rail engine coal-filler, and later graduated into an assistant train driver. The family smelt cash. Another uncle, Dileep, followed Indrajeet. Unwilling to be left behind, my father too reached Burma. The eldest of the brothers (my fourth uncle), Baldev, managed the house and was a community leader.

I grew up hearing stories of the house. Hectic activity preceded the actual construction, as I mentioned before. With some Hindu kind of ceremony, the construction of the brick kiln was set in motion. The news spread like wildfire. Never before had a Dalit set up a brick kiln. Smart as he was, the village *zamindar*—an upper caste Bhumihar—sensed a threat to his position. He had to act.

Locals would differ over the colour of the horse he rode that day. But most seemed to think that he

came on a white horse—a rarity at that time. Whatever the colour, he rode a horse to cover a distance of less than three hundred meters to reach our house.

'The height of your house should not surpass mine,' he told Baldev. It was a piece of advice that was laced with a threat. The *zamindar* couldn't have been any more explicit, for he was held back by an event in the past.

Before Burma happened, my family had got entangled in a bloody fight with a landlord who was a rival of our *zamindar*. A Dalit young man had refused to go on a *Begar* to the said landlord's lands. *Begar* is a term used to denote the labour that is supplied to landlords without any wages in return. As per tradition, *zamindars* and big landlords had rights over Dalit labour. For at least two to three days in the sowing and harvesting seasons, each Dalit family was expected to provide a certain amount of free labour. But this particular landlord was breaking the social contract that had been agreed upon—he was asking the Dalit for more days of *Begar*. The Dalit in question had already gone on *Begar* more than half a dozen times in the course of that season. And then he refused.

The landlord summoned the Dalit, and thrashed him. The Dalit approached my uncle Baldev with tears in his eyes. Being a leader of the Pasis, Baldev had to act, and against him was a strong adversary. The said landlord, it was known, had harassed other members of the Dalit community as well.

Accompanied by a dozen Pasi youths as well as his three brothers, Baldev led the charge, and chased the landlord when he was visiting his paddy fields a kilometre away from the village. Sensing the Dalits' mood, the landlord ran and finally jumped into a pond next to his farm. The Pasis surrounded him. The Chamars of the village waited in a nearby field as a 'reserve' force. The landlord was simultaneously threatening and pleading with his pursuers. Then, the Pasis jumped into the pond, and dragged the landlord out. They left him bleeding.

The same evening, barring Baldev, the house manager and community leader, the three brothers—Indrajeet, my father and my third uncle—fled the village. Baldev was left alone to safeguard the house. Helped by the Pasis and the Chamar youth who guarded the Dalit hamlet, a massacre was prevented. That's how Indrajeet reached Burma. Uncle Dileep and my father Saleep returned home after wandering for days in the area.

It was 'breaking news' of sorts in the area. A big landlord had been attacked by Dalits. The police descended on our village. Though the Dalits somehow escaped the wrath of the police, a case was registered against a dozen Pasis, including my father and his three brothers.

Every time I listened to this story during my childhood, I couldn't help being somewhat sceptical about the accuracy of the account. I had memories of the late 1960s, and I found it incredible that after beating up a landlord, the family escaped the brutality of the police and the landlords. None in the family and neighbourhood would agree with me, but I tended to believe that our *zamindar* had played a big role by not doing anything. It could as well have been that the police was lenient towards our family as my grandfather had served in the police department. Or that the British sense of justice had percolated and finally manifested on this occasion. Or that the landlord was already in the bad books of the administration. My family, however, takes unreserved pride in this episode.

The *zamindar* thus might have taken all such factors into account and hence, didn't physically

prevent the construction of the house. It wouldn't have been unusual for him to attempt something like that given the kind of clout *zamindars* enjoyed in those days.

Baldev knew a thing or two about discretion being distinct from valour. He assured the *zamindar* that the 'height' of the house would not surpass his. Baldev here made a compromise, but catered to the family's pride as well. He asked the workers to elevate the ground on which the house was to come up. The house was built. The height of the house was, as promised, lower than the *zamindar's*, but it *looked* taller. In addition, Baldev constructed another building next to the house—a large hall for the male members of the family, which also served as a meeting place for the community. Over time, this building was extended further to accommodate cattle.

The house I was born in came to be known as *bada ghar*, meaning the 'big house' or the house of the 'big', among our community. In front of the house, Baldev had a well dug up, with a brick wall constructed around it.

The *zamindar's* greed deserves a mention here. My uncles would send a host of worldly goods back home from Burma. Most popular were the umbrellas—a symbol of pride in those days. On one occasion, my uncle sent a big, bronze cooking vessel. A cooking vessel like that was a rarity and hence a prized possession. Needed for community dinners during marriages and festivals, these vessels could only be sourced from far-away places. This was a great occasion to make a statement, and uncle Baldev promptly organized a community dinner to celebrate the arrival of the vessel. As the story goes, a pig weighing over 40 kg paid the price on this happy occasion. The Pasis, my sub-caste, are identified with pig-rearing as their caste occupation, and the community relishes pork greatly.

While the pork was being cooked—needless to say, in the new vessel—the *zamindar* arrived. It was late in the evening and this time he wasn't on a horse. Curious about the mystery vessel, he had simply walked those hundred meters to our house.

He saw the vessel and coveted it, and he whispered his desire in the ears of Baldev. He was even willing to enter into a give-and-take deal. 'But we are cooking pork in the vessel,' Baldev is said to have told the *zamindar*. Since pork was a Dalit-only food in the area, my uncle didn't expect that the *zamindar* would still want the vessel. 'Who knows that the vessel was used to cook pork except your family and relatives?', thus countered the *zamindar*. And the issue was settled just as the *zamindar* had wanted. After washing it with ash, the bronze vessel was transported to the *zamindar's* house before dawn. This greedy side of the landlord holds a mirror to the Caste Order. The rituals, the hierarchies and the elaborate schema of purity and pollution would all cave in under the weight of material lures and political/social expediency.

It would be unfair to the *zamindar* if I didn't mention the humane side to him. One day, my cousin was preparing to catch fish in the nearby pond, and he cut his finger while putting the bait onto the hook. Scared as he was, he started crying. The *zamindar* happened to be passing by; he heard the boy and got off his horse. He tore off a piece of his turban and bandaged my cousin's finger to check the bleeding. This may sound like no big deal, but think of the times and the setting. Here was a *zamindar*, one fond of wearing a turban made of fine fabric that ran into seven meters, tearing it off for the sake of a Dalit boy. It was not a life-and-death question, a mere cut on a finger—of a Dalit boy. The *zamindar's* compassion on that occasion is still mentioned whenever the family recalls

those days.

We grew up with a sense of pride, and yet many of the stories that we were told were bleak and hurtful. While, on the one hand, my grandfather had become a *chaukidar* (that is, a guard, the lowest post in the British-India police force), his elder brother had died behind bars in the Benaras Central prison. He was a known 'bandit' in the area, but in the view held by the elders in our community, 'He was a social bandit.' 'He fought against upper-caste landlords,' was the common refrain. He once broke out of the Gorakhpur prison, and escaped. The police launched a massive manhunt but to no avail. Wandering around for months, he arrived home one evening. The next morning, he was roasting a piglet to celebrate his 'home-coming', when the police, who had come to know of his moves, surrounded our house. He was captured. Then the police officer is said to have asked him how he could manage to escape from the high-security prison of Gorakhpur. 'Want to know?' he asked, and the officer nodded in affirmation. 'Follow me,' he said and zoomed off. Before the police could realize what had happened, he was lost in the nearby fields: he had escaped again. How far this account is true or what parts of it have been embellished, I don't know, but the story is now part of the family lore. Years later, he was captured again and put into Benaras Central prison, where he died. It hurts me even now that our family could do nothing to help him.

Stories of pride and shame apart, my childhood witnessed a phase of poverty as well. During World War II, as news filtered in of a Japanese advance towards India, all Indian workers in Burma were asked to leave the country. To reach home, my uncles, Indrajeet and Dileep, and my father had to walk hundreds of miles and use every kind of transportation possible; their ordeal took weeks.

Post Burma, whatever savings were left lasted a few months. In Burma, amidst an alien social set-up, the brothers were accustomed to an existence of anonymity and relative social freedom.

Back home, they found landlords picking fights with them on the silliest of issues. While the family adjusted to the reduced income levels, their new-found sense of freedom didn't allow them to stomach arbitrary injustices. Within the span of a few years, first India's independence and then the abolition of the Zamindari system set in motion a whole new socio-economic process whose end we are yet to see. The abolition of the Zamindari system meant that village landlords had lost their clout; yet, they held on to their arrogance. Litigations followed. The village *zamindar* and my family fought prolonged legal battles. Both sides suffered financial losses. Moreover, uncle Baldev contested the 1952 assembly elections from a general seat. He lost. Plenty of money was lost in the process. Our family was thus plunged into a period of financial distress that lasted for over a decade.

It was primarily a result of our economic condition that the family split. The four sons of my grandfather separated. I was born in that phase of want. I was to hear later from my parents that my father worked for a landlord for a few years to ensure the education of my elder brother, who became a police officer in 1969.

I have faint memories of eating *rotis* made of dry peas—an Indian variant of bread—thanks to our new-found poverty. Dry peas were ground and made into bread. The bread would not only be tasteless but also too hard to eat; if left unconsumed, the bread would in a few hours turn virtually into stone. Fortunately, our family had some land and we grew pulses as well. So we would break the bread into pieces and immerse the pieces in *dal*. That way, eating became a little easier. We missed

and often prayed for wheat bread. Eating rice was a rare privilege, possible as it was only during weddings and festivals. Our family, like most Dalit families in the area, had a substitute for rice. We grew barnyard millets. White and tiny, like mustard in size, barnyard millets look like a kind of mini-rice. Any description of the humble grain in terms not only of its shape and size but its taste as well runs the risk of an over-statement. Elsewhere in the world, the grain is grown as 'green manure'. There was also the finger millet, which sustained us during our lean seasons. The finger millet goes well with a certain local-pond variety of small fish.

The story, however, must go on from fish to rats, up the evolutionary ladder. I wasn't even ten when I joined the band of rat catchers. As per tradition, only those who hunted the rats had the right to eat rat-meat. Since I was too young—and hence too inexperienced—to hunt rats on my own, I would join the rat catchers and run around with them to justify my claims. I was given a bit of it—often the baby rats. This Dalit-only meat was a great source of protein, though we didn't go on these hunts with any protein calculation in mind. We would wait for the three main rat-catching seasons—the harvesting of wheat in April, that of paddy in October, and first rains in the last week of June.

There are two ways of hunting rats during the harvesting seasons. One can either dig the ground, exposing the tunnels in which the rats live, or flood the tunnels with water. We would carry hoes, crowbars and buckets on our expeditions. If the land was dry, which was more often the case in April, we used water to choke the air-flow to the rats. Once the tunnels were filled with water—drawn from the nearby ponds—the rats would come out one by one. Before the rats actually arrived, there would be signs and faint sounds that only an experienced rat-catcher could discern. We would wait breathlessly as the water-surface moved and became bubbly. The moment a rat came out, we should catch it by hand, or it would start running. For the ones that got away, we would give chase with sticks in hand. Within a couple of years of going on these missions, I had graduated into a 'master rat-catcher'.

In the rainy season, with the flooding of the lower grounds, the rats would leave their burrows and dig small tunnels into patches of higher ground, running into not more than a couple of feet. We could identify them easily.

The game of eating and distributing rat meat followed a pattern. For the record, rat meat was never cooked as a curry. Nor did we bring the rats home, as the elders would shout at us. We carried matchboxes, and the rats were roasted on fires made with dry shrubs and grass. With a bit of salt, we ate the roasted rats. The 'master catcher' had the first right over the game, and he distributed the rest according to the age of the members. I cannot remember a Dalit of my age in Eastern UP who did not hunt rats. When I bring up the subject with my contemporaries today, they all think that we must have eaten at least a thousand rats each.

Although my family's economic condition improved after my brother joined the police department, I continued eating rats. Once an upper-caste friend asked me, 'Why do you continue eating rat-meat and pork when your economic situation is so good now?' I wish I had asked him, 'Why am I still separated during public dinners at your place when I wear clothes as good as yours?'

I vividly recall how we ate separately at public dinners hosted by upper-caste families. As per tradition, these families would throw public dinners to mark weddings or deaths of the elderly. One

male member from each of the families in the village would be invited irrespective of caste. Often, Dalit children would join the feasts uninvited.

Sometimes, a few select Dalit individuals would be given the right to collect food for their entire family. That wouldn't be left-over food, but proper food that had been cooked so that a certain number of families could be fed.

I recall at least one such incident when members of my family brought food from a landlord's house on the occasion of his son's wedding. Always mindful of his image and that of his family, my father never brought food himself. Someone else would bring the food to my home. Poorer Dalit friends of mine waited for weddings to take place in upper-caste families, and prayed for elderly upper-caste men and women to die.

I came across the practice of Untouchability as well several times during my childhood. The day we got news that my brother had qualified for police service, my father along with a few of his colleagues visited the only liquor shop in the village. An upper-caste family without any feudal ancestry ran the liquor shop illegally. At that time, no one bought a full bottle of liquor. Customers would go to the liquor shop and have their drink sitting outside the house of the liquor seller. Delighted by the news of my brother's selection, my father that day took me along on his shoulders to the liquor shop. I had my first drink, and I wasn't even ten.

In the days after my brother joined the police training college, my father would often visit the liquor shop. Sometimes, I would tag along against his will, and would end up receiving a quarter of a peg. Since my brother had become a police officer, the liquor-shop-owning, upper-caste family would treat me more kindly. They were often harassed by policemen of the area and probably thought that my brother could be of some help if they needed it. Taking advantage of my new-found status, I would often sneak into the house of the liquor man. On such occasions, I would play with the children in his family. At least three of them were my age, and one attended the same school as I did.

One evening, I had accompanied my father to the liquor shop (or *liquor house*, should such a term be allowed). While my father was busy with his session, I went inside the house to play with the kids; the elder son had by then become a friend of mine. It was winter and the kids were eating fried, green peas. The liquor-man's wife, a kind lady, wanted to offer me some of the fried peas.

But there was a problem. There wasn't any caste-neutral plate in their house. Bizarre as it may sound, the upper castes in my village had discovered a genre of caste-neutral cups and plates. Most culturally 'advanced' upper-caste families would have a set of white, ceramic cups and plates called the *Chini mitti plates/cups*, literally meaning 'plates and cups made of Chinese clay'. Initially, these were meant for Muslim guests. Later, Dalits too were served in these special cups and plates.

By the late 1960s, Dalits had become visible in lower-level government jobs—as revenue officials and policemen in particular. As part of their duties, they would travel to the villages. Their role was important since the upper-caste landlords would often be at fault—manipulating records of land or harassing commoners. These plates came in handy to entertain Dalit officials and the practice extended to treating one's educated Dalit friends as well. The upper-caste landlords would also eat or drink tea in similar plates/cups as offered to their Dalit guests. The Dalits would be happy with such evidence of the 'disappearance' of Untouchability. The Chinese-clay cups and plates, however,

had a mysterious side to them.

In most villages inhabited by the upper castes, there would be a few lower OBC families whose womenfolk would work as house-maids. Known as Kahars, these women would wash the utensils, and sometimes even cook in upper-caste homes. A Kahar friend of mine once unravelled for me the mystery behind the upper-caste, cup-plate 'secularism'. The upper castes, he said, would 'mark' the cups and plates that they intended to serve their Dalit guests with. The mark would be at the bottom of a cup or a plate—often as a flick of paint or a small scratch. Traditionally, guests had no role in the matter of choosing their cups or plates when, say, they sat down to have tea. The host would place the *marked* cups and plates in front of Dalit guests. Once the guests were done, these would be kept separately. The Dalits subjected to this ruse would develop a sense of gratitude towards their upper-caste host who had so 'broad-mindedly' eaten in a similar plate.

Coming back to the green peas, the plate problem was finally resolved. The liquor-man served his liquor in little, clay tumblers, and three such tumblers were brought in and I was served fried peas in them. Those little cups were popular in liquor shops throughout the north-Indian countryside. While the upper-caste kids, including the one who studied with me in the same class in school, ate in steel plates, I ate in clay cups. I had heard how upper-caste men, women and kids were given to saying nasty things about Dalits. On that day, in the liquor-man's house, instead of feeling any hurt or humiliation, I experienced a sense of elation for I was, all things considered, eating with upper-caste children.

The caste order too makes adjustments when confronted with situations of distress. Less than a mile south of my village, there were a school and a college, catering to students from class VI onwards to the BA level. There were a few villages to the north that were inhabited by upper-caste people. A number of boys and girls from the north studied in the degree college. To reach college they had to cross my village, and pass in front of my house. When it rained, these students would take shelter in my house as it was centrally located. There were occasions when they had to stop for several hours at my home in the evenings. In those days, the evening shift of examinations went on from 3 to 6 pm. So, even two hours of bad weather meant that the girls couldn't go home unescorted.

I feel a strange sense of warmth when I recall those times. Often, my mother would ask the girls to eat something as it would be dinner time for us. She would assure them that the food would be cooked by lower OBC women and they would bring plates as well. The upper caste girls hesitated initially, but finally agreed and accepted the tea and the snacks, and on occasions even food, cooked by us using our utensils. Later, this became routine.

Two things always puzzled me. Why didn't the girls take shelter in the upper-caste homes that were less than a hundred meters away from mine? Why didn't they go with the boys of their own castes and from the same villages who went home after the rains cleared? Why did they have to wait for their fathers/brothers to come and take them home?

It took some time for me to figure out this puzzle. The fact was that the girls were not comfortable taking shelter in the upper-caste houses or going with the boys of their own caste. As they would confide in one girl in my family, 'Most of these guys are a threat'; 'We always feel safe in your house.' My family, on the other hand, experienced a sense of elevation in serving these upper-caste

girls. We took pride in the fact that the upper-caste girls were accepting our hospitality.

Here's another story to illustrate the flexible nature that the Caste Order would assume when its primary enforcers were faced with a crisis. Around 1972, one of my cousins was in the second phase of his marriage. Among Dalits and lower OBCs in those days, marriages took place in three phases. A rarity today, the first phase would involve the couple as children, taking place before either had reached ten years of age; in some cases, children below the age of five are known to have been married off. But the bride and the groom would never meet or see each other until the second phase of such marriages. The second phase took place after the children crossed their teens, and that's when the bride would come to the groom's house. The occasion is known as *Gawana* in my part of the country. The bride then stayed for a few days—usually, two to three days—and then returned to her parents' house. The third phase known as the *Tenga* took place when the groom led a few of his family members to the bride's house. The bride would now come to her husband's house to settle for life. She would keep going to her parental place though, but more as a guest than a member of the family.

Coming back to the story, my cousin was in the second phase of his marriage. He had dropped out of his studies and fled to Faridabad, an industrial suburb of Delhi, to become a factory worker. There, he became a unionist instead.

So there he was, well-dressed and fresh from Delhi, and with enough money for our family to afford a car to bring his bride home. Only a kid then, I too was accommodated in the Ambassador car. The car belonged to the son of an ex-landlord of the village. This upper-caste man, incidentally, was into the illegal liquor business.

Upon reaching the bride's house, the car owner decided to cook his meal separately. A few more non-Dalits joined him for they too needed to cook separately. It wasn't unusual for upper-caste men to attend Dalit weddings and accompany the groom's party to the bride's house and stay there overnight. Such non-Dalit guests would, however, cook their food separately. It would generally be up to one of the non-Dalit guests to cook for the group, or in some cases, the bride's family would provide a cook—often, a lower OBC man from the village. The upper-caste guests would be supplied with raw grain, wheat flour, pulses and vegetables. More often than not, they would be given better-quality stuff than that served to the Dalit wedding party.

The non-Dalit guests would use clay vessels to cook their food. The clay vessels— quasi-Chinese clay plates—are baked in high temperatures and as a result become strong enough to be used for cooking. However, a certain amount of caution is required. To avoid damage to the vessels, the food is cooked on low temperatures using cow-dung cakes—a feature of the countryside. The cow-dung cakes are arranged on the ground into a platform, and lit. They take time to burn, but once the flames die down these cakes behave like burning coal. The cow-dung platform shimmers, and a clay vessel is then placed over.

In this case, our upper-caste guests were given a chicken as a gesture of good hospitality. It was, after all, not every day that a Dalit bride is taken to her husband's house in a car. With it being already dark and with the upper-caste guests all in a hurry to eat, the people in charge of cooking the chicken inserted many more cow-dung cakes than were needed; this produced flames and a lot of

heat. The clay vessel broke into pieces, dropping the chicken curry into the flames. There was no way anybody could eat that mess. On that occasion, six upper-caste guests betrayed their caste diktats, and ate pulses and vegetables cooked by Dalits for Dalit guests.

Coming to my upper-caste friend's question—Why did I still eat rat-meat and pork when my family was no longer poor?

Similar questions were being asked by Dalit social workers of the time. I can clearly recall two groups of social workers who frequented our area. One group of five to six people, primarily from the neighbouring Gazipur district, would come to my village and stay at my house for a couple of days. They would be all Pasis. Of the 25-odd Pasi families in my village, five reared pigs for a living. The reformers would narrate stories as to how Pasi families that reared pigs would never get education and would thus always be out of the government jobs. 'Pig rearing is the reason for your backwardness,' they would say. 'It is because of our caste's association with pigs that we are untouchables. It is only because a few Pasi families raise pigs that all Pasis are despised,' they would lament.

Almost entirely blaming the community for its Untouchable status, and not the Caste Order or the systems of Brahmanism, the Pasi reformers would issue threats of ex-communication to pig-rearing Pasi families. These reformers would move on to other villages, often taking a member or two from our village. Today, no Pasi family rears pigs in my village. The practice ceased a decade ago.

Next to the Pasi hamlet lived 50-odd Chamar families. My memories are still vivid of Chamar reformers visiting the Chamar hamlet, for these people too would come to our house. There were three members in my family with government jobs—my brother in the police, one cousin in the postal service, and another cousin in the railways. They had colleagues in the Chamar hamlet, and when everyone came home during festivals they would eat and drink together. They were all charged up with the ideas of Ambedkar, and talked of the Dalit Panthers fondly.

The Chamar reformers were asking the Chamar families to stop lifting and skinning dead cattle. As per the traditions of the village, whenever an animal died the Chamars would be asked to lift and dispose of the carcass. There was one Chamar family engaged in the occupation of skinning dead cattle, and everyone suspected that family of eating beef.

Like the Pasi reformers, the Chamar reformers too were blaming the community's association with leather-work as the reason for their Untouchable status. Over time, the Chamars of my village stopped lifting dead cattle, and the lone family engaged in skinning too withdrew from that occupation. The message of reform had quicker results among the Chamars than among the Pasis.

In terms of awareness, by the time I passed my high school in 1975, most Dalits had stopped hunting rats. Half of the Dalit families that had been in pig-rearing had withdrawn from the occupation. Pork would be brought into my home secretly. Most Dalit families, however, still faced grinding poverty and depended primarily on millets. One of the fond memories of my childhood was — the 'Dr Ambedkar Kirti Club', formed by Dalit elders to promote sports within the community. The Ambedkar Club was a virtual branch of the Dalit Panthers since it addressed caste-related issues as well. Incidentally, one Munoo Rai, a Bhumihar with no feudal ancestry, also accompanied the Dalit youth as they went to play matches in far-away villages and schools. Kabaddi was the main

sport then.

INTRODUCTION

1. Bernestine Singley (ed.), *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002).

CHAPTER 3

The writing of this piece was facilitated by the Sesquicentennial Award, Spring 2008, of the University of Virginia.

1. I employ the term 'caste mind' to characterize those deeply engrained social and psychological ways and differences that persist despite the educated modern Indian wish to banish caste for good. In daily life, the 'caste mind' is still taken for granted. Though in terms of their social functions and meanings the two may overlap, 'caste mind' is not the same as 'castes of mind', a term coined by Nicholas Dirks in his study of colonialism. See N. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2001).
2. R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

CHAPTER 4

1. My paternal grandfather had migrated from a small town in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, in 1923, when a number of Tamil Brahmins left for industrial work opportunities in the North, especially Calcutta and Bombay. This was in the wake of the anti-Brahmin movement in the South and the changing political-economic conditions of Brahmins, who until then had enjoyed many caste privileges in the form of either land grants that allowed them to be absentee landlords and/or administrative positions in the feudal economy of the countryside.
2. *Ulakattille irendu jati than irukku: aanum pennum.*
3. Such rituals in observance of purity were possible of course only in spaces such as the *agraharam* or the Brahmin streets/quarters in South India.
4. As it turned out, like most other *bais* in Mumbai, Ramabai too was a Dalit.
5. It is necessary to now distinguish the Arendtian sense from the Bush sense of the term 'axis of evil'. For the former, evil arises out of conditions that give rise to it and is capable of arising in anyone. This does not seem to hold true for the latter sense of the term.
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). pp. 466–84.
7. See *Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai), 13 October 2007.

CHAPTER 7

1. The rules of the game do not allow anyone to name Dilip Kumar, one high profile exception to this rather miserly list.
2. A high-level committee, chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, set up by the Prime Minister to look into the social and economic deprivation of the Muslim community. It submitted its report on 30 November 2006, providing reams of data to show how the Muslim population was relatively the poorest community in India, behind the backward castes, the Schedules Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

CHAPTER 9

1. For a more detailed analysis of the town, read the article, Avijit Ghosh, ‘Requiem for Ranchi’, *The Telegraph*, 4 August 2002.
2. ‘Rural Youth: A Fractured Face’, was published in *The Pioneer*, 8 February 1998.
3. Ibid.
4. ‘Cry, Freedom’, *The Pioneer*, 16 August 1998.
5. ‘Once a Beggar, Now a Messiah’, *The Times of India*, 18 November 2006.
6. ‘A Devastated Community’, *The Times of India*, 3 September 2005.

CHAPTER 11

1. I warmly thank Jacob Copeman, James Laidlaw, Alan Macfarlane, Magnus Marsden and Christopher Bayly for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I alone am responsible for its remaining deficiencies.
2. That is, when people spoke (and still speak) of 'our community', they could mean those with whom they share ties of faith as well as those whom they identify as 'caste fellows'. Yet, at the same time, for those professing as a virtuous cause such goals as the campaign to unite and advance 'the Hindu nation', a 'Mandalite' enemy may be reviled as 'casteist' for championing the interests or needs of fellow Yadavs, 'Backwards' or OBCs.

CHAPTER 13

1. A poetic translation of the nursery rhyme would be difficult. The first alliterative line was accompanied by gestures of expelling the erstwhile friend from the friendship circle. The second line meant ‘I am king and you are a *bhangi*.’
2. This phrase literally means ‘What kind of Thakur are you?’ I discussed the connotations of this phrase with a friend who still lives in this town. He believes that it is a polite way of asking the question ‘What caste are you?’ If someone replied that they were ‘Thakurs’, then the question that would naturally follow would be whether they were Thakurs of three *gharas*, thirteen *gharas* or sixty-three *gharas*. As the word ‘ghar’ means ‘home’ in Hindi, this phrase illustrates the tight-knit nature of a caste-based community.
3. Foods in our area were described as ‘pakka’ and ‘kachha’. ‘Pakka’ food consisted of fried things such as *pooris* and *kachauris*, and was considered ‘non-polluting’. ‘Kachha’ food meant items such as rice, *chapatis*, *karhi*, etc., and could not be offered to those above one in the caste hierarchy. These rules seem to have been relaxed these days, thanks to the mid-day-meal schemes for school children. However, my friend who is a school teacher informed me that people rationalize the interdining of children by saying that they are exempt until after marriage.

CHAPTER 17

1. M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, 6 March 1937.
2. Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 172.
3. M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and other essays* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 3.
4. Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, *The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004), p. 4.
5. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, 'Introduction', in Omprakash Valmiki, *Jhoothan: A Dalit's Life*, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (Kolkata: Samya Publications, 2003), p. xxxii.
6. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches, Volume V, Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989).
7. Ibid.
8. Suhasini Ali Sehgal, 'Chuva chat ka badta rog', *Dainik Jagaran* (Dehradun), 12 October 2006.
9. *Sahara Samay* (Dehradun), 8 September 2005.
10. Subhash Gatade, *Amar Ujala* (Dehradun), 4 October 2006.
11. Bhagwan Das, 'Socio-Economic Problems of Dalits' in Bhagwan Das and James Massey (eds.), *Dalit Solidarity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), p. 58.
12. Omprakash Valmiki, *Jhoothan: A Dalits Life*, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (Kolkata: Samya Publications, 2003).
13. Ibid., pp. 4–6.
14. Ibid., pp. 23–24.

Glossary

Editors' Note: While preparing the glossary, we have identified the non-English words and phrases that do not carry their meaning or the context in which they are used. We have left out those words and phrases whose usage in the volume conveys their meaning. The effort is to help the reader in understanding the context, not to offer a definitive meaning. For example, it is futile to define a word such as '*Dharma*' in a couple of lines when scholars produce tomes on it. The sources of these definitions are many, but mostly Web-based, including the *Wikipedia*.

Aavani Avittam Every year on *Aavani Avittam* (Aavani is a month in Tamil calendar falling in August-September), the *poonool* or sacred thread is changed anew, along with the chanting of mantras. This ceremony is performed by all the three twice-born Hindu castes, viz., Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya.

Abhivadeya The tradition of one mentioning his name and *gotra* (*vamsaparampara*) while one greets an elder.

Acharam (Orig. Sanskrit) for tradition

Adda In many Indian languages, *adda* is a light-hearted description of a place wherein people united by some commonalities (classmates, neighbourhood kids, etc) indulge in sophistry, though serious discourse is not forbidden.

Adivasi(s) (Hindi) for original inhabitant(s). Used for 'Tribal(s)'.

Akali(s) Literally Akali means deathless being *(kal* is death). Used mostly for the members of the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal.

Amar Chitra Katha Comics *Amar* (immortal) *Chitra* (pictorial) *Katha* (stories) is the most popular comic book series published in many Indian languages. Stories from religion, epics and history are retold in attractive pictorial format.

Ananthamurthy's *Samskara Samskara* (its meaning encompasses culture, tradition, funeral, ritual; ritual rites of passages, etc.) is a Kannada novel written by U. R. Ananthamurthy in 1965. It is a scathing attack on Brahmanical lifestyle in which rituals are given primacy. Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Coolila Sangham Andhra Pradesh Agricultural (Vyavasaya) Labourers' (Coolila) Association (Sangham)

Ansaris Originally ones who took care of migrants, now refers to an occupational group comprising weavers.

Arya Samajis Members of the Arya Samaj (Sanskrit 'Noble Society'), which is a Hindu reform movement founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875.

Ashraf A name found in most Muslim countries, Ashraf refers to those who claim direct descent from Muhammad by way of his daughter Fatimah. The word comes from the Arabic sharif ('noble'), from *sharafa* ('to be highborn').

ASP Short for *Ankuram-Sangamam-Poram*, the cooperative federation in the *Dappu* collective was brought together by consolidating the livelihood and women empowerment work of all member organizations, where *Prajwala* had played a critical role.

Ayyankali Ayyankali (1863–1941) was a Dalit leader and social reformer from Kerala. He pioneered many reforms to improve the lives of the Dalits.

Babu In South Asia, a title of respect and also a part of a person's name. The Indian bureaucrats are called derogatorily as babus.

Bahujan Bahu (many) and *jan* (people). The word has assumed political significance because of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) whose political arithmetic was to represent all Indians except the top three upper castes who are a small minority in India's population. See also Dalit-Bahujan and Kanshi Ram.

Bai(s) In Bundelkhand region of central India, older women, regardless of social status, are addressed as *'bai'* (pl. 'bais').

Baniya(s) A more popular north Indian term for Vaishya, a trader or merchant caste, one of the three upper castes, viz., Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya — in that order. Baniyas are also known by their sub-caste or regional names.

basti In Hindi, a habitation.

Behanji In Hindi, *behan* means sister and *ji* is added as a honorific (as in guru-ji) when addressing a female who is not a relative.

Bhandaris One of the Brahmin castes in Maharashtra

Bhangi(s) One of the Dalit castes, Bhangis are traditionally associated with cleaning latrines and handling dead bodies (both human and animal). However, very few among them now carry out these functions.

Bhangin A woman belonging to the Bhangi caste.

Bharathar nation Bharathar (evoking Bharat, an ancient Sanskrit term for the subcontinent) is a caste title now widely used by members of the Tamil maritime population once widely known as Paravas; the phrase 'Bharathar nation' thus exalts the Parava/Bharathar as a

people of noble descent and heritage.

Bhat(s) Bhats or Bhatiyars are a Muslim nomadic group in North India. Bhats are also a Brahmin sub-caste in Maharashtra, the coastal areas of Karnataka and Kerala, and Kashmir.

Bhumihars Bhumihars are a land-owning upper caste mostly found in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and parts of Madhya Pradesh.

biradari (Hindi) community or extended family

Brahmacharya In the Vedic tradition, there are four phases of life that every twice-born Hindu has to follow: *Brahmacharya* (life before marriage), *Grihastha* (household life), *Vanaprastha* (that of a hermit), and finally *Sannyasa* (that of a monk).

Brahmo A Brahmo is an adherent of Brahmoism, as practised by the members of the Brahmo Samaj, a 19th century religious society that rejected polytheism, Sati, caste system, dowry system and stood for widow remarriage, emancipation of women, etc.

Chai Tea (Hindi)

Chaitanya Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) is a Vaishnava saint and social reformer from Bengal.

Chamars Largest Dalit caste in India. It is associated with leather work, though a majority of Chamars do not practise it.

charpai It's a portable string cot, with many uses. The word '*char*' means four, and '*pai*' means legs.

Chaupal(s) (Hindi) A place for people to sit and do work, like in '*e-Chaupal*' (cyber-cafe).

Chowkidar(s) Hindi for watchman (-men)

Churidar(s) Churidars, or more properly *churidar pyjamas*, are tightly fitting trousers worn by both men and women in South Asia and Central Asia.

CKPs It stands for Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu is a Kshatriya/ writer caste, a part of the Kayastha community prominently found in northern and eastern India.

Dada A Bengali word, *dada* means (for Muslims in Bangladesh) paternal grandfather and (for Hindus in the Indian state of West Bengal) elder brother.

Dalit-Bahujan Dalit has now become a generic name for all Scheduled Castes and *Bahujan* literally means a majority of the people. *Dalit-Bahujan* is a popular term used to advocate unity among the victims of the caste system, i.e., the Dalits (former Untouchables) and other lower castes. Some even include minorities in this group.

Dappu Dappu is the traditional drum used by Dalit communities, made out of leather and a common accompaniment in social and religious functions. Non-Dalits do not play the drum.

Deepavali (also Diwali) In Hinduism, it is the homecoming of Lord Ram, after a 14-year exile in the forest and his victory over the evil demon-king Ravana. In the legend, the people of Ayodhya (the capital of his kingdom) welcomed Ram by lighting rows (*avali*) of lamps (deepa), thus its name: Deepavali. Over the years, it has become a national festival as people from all faiths celebrate it.

Dharma (Sanskrit) The term is an Indian spiritual and religious term that means one's righteous duty or any virtuous path in the common sense of the term. It is also used in a wider sense for religion, *a la* the Hindu *Dharma*.

Diksha Bhumi In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, *diksha* is the ritual of initiation into the worship of some deity. *Bhumi* is land or place. *Diksha Bhumi* is also the place in Nagpur in Maharashtra where Dr Ambedkar converted into Buddhism in 1956.

Dr Ida Scudder Dr Ida Sophia Scudder (9 December 1870–24 May 1960) was an American medical missionary in India. She dedicated her life to the plight of Indian women and the fight against bubonic plague, cholera and leprosy. In 1918, she started one of Asia's foremost teaching hospitals, the Christian Medical College and Hospital, Vellore, India.

Dupatta Dupatta (aka *orni, chunri, Chadar, chunni, orna* and *unni*) is a long scarf that is essential to many South Asian women's suits. It is worn across both shoulders, its ends hanging on the back.

Dusadh It is a Dalit sub-caste in Bihar.

Dvapara yuga Yuga in Hindu philosophy is an 'epoch' or 'era' within a cycle of four ages. These are the Satya Yuga (or Krita Yuga), the Treta Yuga, the Dvapara Yuga and finally the Kali Yuga. According to Hindu cosmology, the world is created, destroyed and recreated every 4,320,000 years (Maha Yuga). The cycles are said to repeat like the seasons, waxing and waning within a greater time-cycle of the creation and destruction of the universe.

Eid Short for Eid ul-Fitr or Id-ul-Fitr. Eid is a Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting.

Ekalavya In the epic *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya is a tribal prince (also referred to as a low caste), who seeks to learn archery from the great guru, Dronacharya. Having been rejected due to his low-birth, Ekalavya masters the art, keeping a clay image of Drona in front of him. He achieves a level of skill equal to that of Arjuna, Drona's favourite and most accomplished pupil. Fearful that Ekalavya will excel him, Arjuna begs Drona to take action. Drona goes to Ekalavya and demands that Ekalavya turn over his right thumb as a teacher's fee. The loyal Ekalavya cripples himself, and thereby ruins his prospects as an archer, by severing his thumb and giving it to Drona.

Ezhava Ezhavas are a middle caste (Shudras) in Kerala.

Faquir(s) (Mostly) a Muslim mendicant monk regarded as a holy man.

Ganesh Chathurti Also known as Vinayaka Chaturthi or Vinayaka Chavithi. The festival is the birthday of the elephant-headed god, Lord Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvati.

Gayatri Mantra *Gayatri Mantra* is considered to be the holiest verse in the Vedas and chanted by Hindus. Interpretation of the mantra by Sir William Jones: 'Let us adore the supremacy of that Divine Sun, the Godhead, who illuminates all, who recreates all, from whom all proceed, to whom all must return, whom we invoke to direct our understanding aright in our progress towards his holy seat.'

ghar jamai husband A henpecked husband. In tradition, usually a man far too lower in wealth or social status to that of his bride, comes and stays in his in-laws' house permanently. The reasons for the practice can be varied. Sometimes, the parents of a lone daughter, and being dependent on her due to their old-age, etc., may insist that their son-in-law should stay with them. However, in arts and literature, a '*ghar jamai* husband' is depicted as a useless person, living at the mercy of his in-laws.

Goanese Goanese or Goans are people from the Indian state of Goa.

Gond Gond is a tribe in central India.

Goonda An outlaw, a don.

Gothram/ Gothra(s)!Gotra Lineage within a caste, indicating common descent from a mythical ancestor. Marriage within the same *gotra* was traditionally prohibited to prevent inbreeding. The term originally denoted segments of the Brahman caste descending from seven ancient seers. The number of Brahman *gotras* later increased, and some non-Brahman Hindu groups also established *gotras*.

Grihasta See *Brahmacharya*

Gurudwara Sikh shrine

Hanuman In the *Ramayana*, Hanuman is the monkey chief and son of Vayu; was an ally of Rama in his battle with Ravana.

Harijan *Hari* (god) and jan (progeny or children); children of god. The name Mahatma Gandhi gave for the (then) Depressed Classes, later known as the Scheduled Castes, Dalits or universally as (former) Untouchables.

Harijan basti A Dalit settlement

Hathi nahin Ganesh hai, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai An electoral slogan (in Hindi) by the Bahujan Samaj Party in the 2007 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in which the BSP, a Dalit party, sought support from upper castes, especially the Brahmins.'It isn't an elephant [which is the BSP's election symbol] but the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh.' The slogan adds 'Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh' (other Hindu gods) for rhyme and rhetoric.

Hyderabadi Of Hyderabad

Iyer Iyers and Iyengars are the two main sub-castes among Brahmins in Tamil Nadu.

Jaativaadi In Hindi, *jaati* means caste and *vaadi* is one who espouses or uses caste as a reference point in public life, such as 'caste politics'. Nowadays, used in pejorative sense.

Jacobite Syrian Christian See Syrian Christian(s)

jajmani (From the Sanskrit *yajamana*, which means 'sacrificial patron who employs priests for a ritual.') Traditionally, the *jajmani system* means a reciprocal social and economic arrangement an upper caste, wealthy household (more often a landlord) enters into with a low- or art isan-caste household for the provision of certain services or labour in exchange for a fixed amount of wage mostly in kind. The arrangement goes on for generations.

Jan Sangh Also known as the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (1951–1980). In 1980, it changed its name to the present Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Both names mean, in Hindi, the Indian people's party. The party equates Hindu ethos and civilization with that of India, allegedly excluding non-Hindu religions, such as Islam and Christianity.

Jats/Jutts An agrarian dominant caste found in Punjab and the adjoining areas (like Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh). Jats in Punjab are called Jutts.

jhootha In Hindi, *jhootha* means any food item that has been tasted by another person, hence implying the exchange of saliva. Also eaten food left-overs.

Jyotirao Phule Mahatma Jyotirao Phule [Jotiba Govindrao Phule (11 April 1827– 28 November 1890)] was an activist, thinker, social reformer and revolutionary from Maharashtra. Hailing from a lower caste, Phule became a trailblazer in areas like education, eradication of Untouchability, women and widow upliftment. He opened the first school for girls in India in 1848. Dr Ambedkar considered Phule as his guru.

Kabaddi In Hindi, Kabaddi (aka Kabbadi or Kabadi) means ‘holding of breath’. It is a team sport originally from the Indian subcontinent. Two teams occupy opposite halves of a field and take turns sending a ‘raider’ into the other half, in order to win points by touching member(s) of the opposing team; the raider then tries to return to his own half, holding his breath during the whole raid, usually by chanting ‘Kabaddi’.

Kahars A lower caste in U.P. whose women work as housemaids and men as palanquin bearers.

Kali yuga See Dvapara yuga

Kallus A derogatory reference to the Blacks. A derivative of the Hindi word *kala* (black).

kaneer flowers China Rose (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*); comes in several colours including red.

Kanshi Ram Kanshi Ram (15 March 1934–9 October 2006) was a Dalit politician and a national leader who founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

Kanya-Kubja Brahmin(s) Brahmins are traditionally divided into two regional groups: Pancha-Gauda Brahmins (north India) and Pancha-Dravida Brahmins (south India) according to Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini:*

‘The Karnatakas, Tailangas, Dravidas, Maharashtrakas and Gurjaras; these five (-types who-) live south ofVindhya (-mountains) are (called-) ‘Dravida’ (-brahmins); (whereas-) Saraswatas, Kanyakubjas, Gaudas, Utkalas, and Maithilas, who live north of Vindhya (-mountains) are known as ‘five Gauda’ (-brahmins).”

Kayastha(s) Found mainly in north India, Kayasthas are regarded as an upper caste. Throughout history, Kayasthas held prominent positions in society as well as in the government as scribes/writers.

Khadi Bhandar A retail outlet found in most places in India, selling *khadi* (hand-woven cotton or silk) garments, and other merchandise produced by village cottage industries. These outlets are managed by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), the Government of India.

Khairlanji A village in Bhandara district of Maharashtra, where a Dalit family of four had been brutally killed by caste Hindus on 29 September 2006.

Khalistan Khalistan was to be the name of a theocratic separate country for the Sikhs in the Indian Punjab sought by (mostly) expatriate Sikhs in North America and the United Kingdom. The movement became violent in the 1980s and petered out by around middle of 1990s.

Khan Sahib Khan Sahib was a formal title, a compound of khan (leader) and sahib (Lord), which was conferred in Mughal and British India on Muslims and Parsis. In practice, any upper-class Muslim male is addressed as Khan Sahib.

Khatri Khatri is a middle caste in Punjab.

Konkanastha(s) Brahmin(s) In Sanskrit, Konkanastha means ‘a resident of Konkan’, the coastal region of western Maharashtra. They are also known as Chitpavan Brahmins or as Kobra (short for KO-nkanastha BRA-hmin). The later expression may be pejorative.

Kurta A loose shirt, worn by both sexes, falling either just above or somewhere below the knees of the wearer. It is popular in Iran, Afghanistan and entire South Asia.

Lakshanam (Sanskrit) symptom; indication; aspect; characteristics.

Lalbegi Lalbegi is a Dalit sub-caste.

Lungivala(s) *Lungi* is a long piece of cloth south Indian men wrap around their waists and down to the ankle and *vala* one who holds or wears. *Lungivala* is used derogatively in some north Indian areas to refer to the south Indians.

Madarasis During the British time and long after, South Indians were called Madarasis; people from the Madras (now Chennai) Presidency.

Madi Madi (In Tamil) is a practice wherein women in the household (among most upper castes, but more strictly among the Brahmins) ensure purity of themselves and the surrounding with a head bath and wearing fresh clothes untouched by anyone who is not observing *madi*. In case of accidental contact with someone who is not in a *madi* state, they bathe again and wear fresh *madi* clothes or wet clothes to renew their *madi*.

Madiga(s)/Mala(s) Madigas and Malas are the two most prominent Dalit sub-castes in Andhra Pradesh and some neighbouring states. The relations between them are marred by social distance, political acrimony over their respective share in the benefits of Affirmative action.

Mahabharata The *Mahabharata* is one of the two great epics of ancient India (the other is the *Ramayana)*.

Mahad A city in the Raigad district of Maharashtra. Well-known for the Mahad Satyagraha launched by Dr Ambedkar in 1927.

Mahar Movement Under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar, the Mahar Movement was an attempt by Mahars (the largest Dalit community in Maharashtra) to gain their rights. During this movement, Dr Ambedkar had burnt the *Manusmriti*.

Mahavir Mahavira (Great Hero) (599–527 BCE) is the name most commonly used to refer to the Indian sage Vardhamana who

established the central tenets of Jainism.

mahua Commonly known as mahwa or mahua, *Madhuca longfolia* is an Indian tropical tree found largely in the central and north Indian plains and forests. It belongs to the family *Sapotaceae*.

Mami Tamil for the universal 'aunty' and also 'mother's brother's wife'.

Mandal Commission, The Set up in 1979, the Mandal Commission was asked to identify the socially or educationally backward 'classes' to receive Affirmative Action benefits. The government's decision in 1990 to implement the Commission's recommendations led to unprecedented violence in the country.

Mantram Mantra(s) (Sanskrit) can be interpreted to be effective as vibration, or more simply as sound, which may include verbal repetition, in the form of chanting, or internal mental repetition. For this reason, great emphasis is put on correct pronunciation (resulting in an early development of a science of phonetics in India). Mantras can be used in Eastern spiritual traditions to divert the mind from basic instinctual desires or material inclinations, by focusing the mind on a spiritual idea, such as 'I am a manifestation of divine consciousness.'

Manusmriti Manusmriti or The Laws of Manu is said to have been composed during 200 BCE and 200 CE and contains extensive rules of caste-mandated rights and duties of various castes.

Marwari(s) People hailing from the Marwar region of the Indian state of Rajasthan. Spread throughout India and abroad, Marwaris are known for their business acumen and entrepreneurial culture, *a la* Jews and Parsis.

master-*ji* Common Indian usage for *guru-ji*.

matlab? (In Hindi) asking to explain something.

mleccha (Sanskrit) a non-Aryan, foreigner, barbarian, etc.

Mofussil Mofussil means suburb, a place away from a city/capital (originally Arabic). In India, the word is used for rural areas. The usage indicates a certain emphasis on empathy or derision, depending on the context.

Mohalla(s) Hindi for locality or neighbourhood.

Mottai A Tamil word meaning to shave the head entirely for religious purposes, etc.

Mushahar(s) Also Musahar(s) is a Dalit caste found in several north Indian states, including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa, etc.

NAACP The National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 for advocating social and economic justice for the Blacks (African-Americans).

Nadar race/caste Nadar, a title signifying 'ruler of land', is used by members of the caste groups also referred to as Kshatriya Nadar, Nadan, Nataar and Shanar; formerly identified with low-status agrarian occupations in Tamil Nadu, many Nadars made extensive gains through involvement in economic and social 'uplift' movements in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Nair Nairs are a landholding non-Brahman Hindu caste in Kerala, popularly viewed as 'upper-caste', claiming Ksatriya status.

Namaskaram The traditional Indian way of greeting elders by joining palms of both hands and keeping them at the middle of the chest.

Namaste See *Namaskaram*

napak (Hindi and Urdu) unholy

Nehrus and Katjus Refers to the influence before and after Independence wielded by the families of Motilal Nehru and his son Jawaharlal Nehru, and Dr Kailash Nath Katju.

Nithari Nithari is a village in western Uttar Pradesh, bordering on Noida, a satellite town of New Delhi. In a shocking development in December 2006, the skeletons of a number of apparently murdered women and children were unearthed in the village. A local businessman, Moninder Singh Pandher and his servant Surender Koli were arrested on the charges of murder and cannibalism. The two were found guilty and awarded death sentence in February 2009.

Padayatra Pada (foot) *yatra* (journey). In the Indian political lexicon, the practice of leaders going on foot, connecting with common people in seeking their support. The practice can be symbolic involving a short distance or a massive exercise spanning hundreds of kilometres. It was a popular mode of campaign that Mahatma Gandhi used several times during the freedom struggle.

Paise Lowest denomination of the Indian currency (rupee), like the cent. A hundred *paise* are one rupee.

pan (*paan*) *Paan* is a South Asian mouth-freshener consisting of areca-nut pieces and spices folded in a betelnut leaf (of *Piperaceae* family).

Pariah (also Paraiyan) Widely used designation for one of the major Dalit groups of Tamil Nadu. See also Parayachi.

Parava/Bharathars See Bharathar nation, above. Caste titles used by members of the Tamil maritime population with occupational traditions identifying them as pearl-divers, maritime traders and fisherfolk.

Parayachi Fem. form for *paraiyar*, a person belonging to a Dalit (Untouchable sub-caste) in Tamil Nadu. The English word, pariah, is derived from this word.

Pasis A Dalit caste in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Delhi, Maharashtra, Haryana, Punjab and Orissa.

Pathan(s) Pashto-speaking people of eastern Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. Their descendents are found in other parts of South

Asia as well.

Pathu Some Tamil Brahmin families observe the strict practice of keeping certain kinds of food items apart for reasons of 'food-chemistry', or not to disturb food preservation. For example, they do not touch milk after touching cooked rice without washing hands, which is like ablution.

Periyar Ramaswami Naicker Periyar Erode Venkata Ramasamy (17 September 1879– 24 December 1973), also known as Ramaswami, EVR, Thanthai Periyar, or Periyar. He was a Tamil nationalist and a Dravidian social activist. He is known for his anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindi positions. He founded the Self-Respect Movement and *Dravidar Kazhagam*, the forerunner to the two main political parties in Tamil Nadu— AIADMK and DMK.

Poonal(s) *Poonool* is a three-stranded cotton thread. Popularly known as the 'sacred thread'. It is worn by the males of Brahmin and other two upper castes, around the trunk of their body over the left shoulder and under the right arm, and represents clothing.

Pottu (Tamil) Round mark, red, white or black, worn on the forehead.

Pradhan (Hindi) Literally means 'greatest leader of all'. For example, the Prime Minister is called in Hindi Pradhan (Prime) Mantri (Minister). Variants include chief, leader and the village elder.

Prajwala In Telugu, eternal flame.

Prasad Literally, a gracious gift. Anything, usually edible, given by a saint, Perfect Master or the *Avatar* to their followers. Anything, usually edible, that is first offered to a deity, saint, Perfect Master or the *Avatar* and then distributed in His name. The *prasad* is believed to have the deity's blessings within it.

pre-Laloo Bihar Refers to times in Bihar before Laloo Prasad Yadav was the state's Chief Minister (1990–1997). His rule allegedly witnessed both the assertion of lower castes and deterioration in governance.

puja Worship, ritual, prayer, etc.

Puja room Prayer room

Puranas (Sanskrit) The *Puranas*, the Hindu (or Jain and Buddhist) religious texts, notably consisting of narratives of the history of the universe from creation to destruction, genealogies of the kings, heroes, sages, and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy, and geography. They are usually written in the form of stories related by one person to another.

Purdah A Persian (also Urdu and Hindi) word for curtain/veil.

Qazi A Muslim judge who dispenses litigation according to the Sharia, the canon law of Islam.

Quaker The word 'Quaker' means to tremble in the way of the Lord. A member of the Religious Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers, is a movement that began in England in the 17th century. Later it spread to other parts of the world including the USA. The Quakers are known for their stress on peace and reconciliation.

Quraishis The name signifies ancestry from the Quraish, the Arab tribe that the Prophet Muhammad belonged to. The tribe is descended from Abraham's son Ishmael. Quraishis are found throughout South Asia.

Raidasi gurudwaras Places of worship for Dalit Sikhs, in which the devotees also worship Guru Ravidas (or Raidas), a 14th century Hindu saint who was a Dalit. Literally, 'gurud- wara' means abode of the master.

Rajput(s) Rajputs or Kshatriyas (the second tier of the caste hierarchy) are warriors and former rulers and they are mostly found in North India.

Ramakrishna, Shri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (18 February1836–16 August 1886), born Gadadhar Chattopadhyay, is a famous mystic of 19th-century India. His religious school of thought led to the formation of the Ramakrishna Mission by his chief disciple Swami Vivekananda—both were influential figures in the Bengali Renaissance and the Hindu renaissance during 19th and 20th centuries. He was considered an *avatar* or incarnation of God by many of his disciples, and is considered as such by many of his devotees today.

Ramakrishna Mission The Ramakrishna Mission is a philanthropic, volunteer organization founded by Sri Ramakrishna's chief disciple Swami Vivekananda on 1 May 1897. The Mission conducts extensive work in healthcare, disaster relief, rural management, tribal welfare, elementary and higher education and culture through its 114 centres spread across India. It uses the combined efforts of hundreds of ordered monks and thousands of householder disciples. The Mission bases its work on the principles of karma yoga.

Rama's slaying of Vali In the Ramayana, the *vanara* (monkey) king Vali was king of Kishkinda, a son of Indra and the elder brother of Sugriva. He was killed by Ram, an avatar of Vishnu. When Vali was getting the better of Sugreeva in battle, Ram positioned hid himself behind a tree and shot the arrow that killed Vali. Ram's action is seen as both cowardly and treacherous.

Ramayana, The The *Ramayana* is one of the two great epics of ancient India (the other is the *Mahabharata)*.

Ram Ram A popular way of greeting each other (in North India) by invoking the name of Lord Ram.

Ranghads An agrarian caste of the Muslims in north-west of the subcontinent.

Rishi(s) A Sanskrit word meaning a Vedic poet, seer, sage, saint, etc.

safai karmachari Safai in Hindi for cleaning and *karmachari* for the one who does the cleaning. But in popular usage, the expression means those in the (caste-ordained) profession of manual scavenging, cleaning streets and other public places.

Sajhis Literally meaning share-croppers (in Punjabi and Haryana Hindi) but is used for the tied/attached workers who often worked as dependent and bonded labourers with big landowners.

Sandhyavandanam The term is a Sanskrit compound consisting of *sandhy* , meaning 'union', or more specifically the union or junctions of day and night, which takes place in the morning or evening twilight, and *vandanam* meaning worship. In addition to dawn and dusk, noon is considered the third juncture of the day, and, hence, meditations and prayers are performed daily at those times.

Sanskritize Sanskritization is the process through which lower castes follow/imitate the manners or customs of the upper castes, so as to improve their social standing.

Sarada Devi Sarada Devi, (1853–1920), born Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya, was the wife and spiritual counterpart of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, a 19th-century mystic of Bengal. Sarada Devi is also reverentially addressed as the Holy Mother. Sarada Devi played an important role in the growth of the Ramakrishna Movement.

Sarpanch The head of a village *panchayat*. Panchayat means a body of (at least) five persons *(panch* means five and *ayat* means body).

Saryupari Brahmin Also known as Saryupareen Brahmins, Sarvarya Brahmins or Saryupariya Brahmins are North Indian Brahmins who reside on the eastern plain of the Sarayu River.

Satnamis Any of several groups in India that have challenged political and religious authority by rallying around an understanding of God as *satnam* (from Sanskrit *satyanaman*, 'he whose name is truth').

Satya yuga See Dvapara yuga

Scheduled Caste The official term for the former Untouchable castes, which are listed in a 'schedule'. Today they are known as the Dalits.

Section 144 Under this section in the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) in India, an executive magistrate is empowered in public interest to impose restrictions on movement or assembly of people to prevent nuisance or apprehended danger.

Shaadi Hindi for marriage.

Shaikh In Arabic, literally means 'elder' used for the leader of an Arab village or family. Also one of the caste groups among North Indian Muslims.

shraddh Sraddha, in Sanskrit, has two meanings, depending on the accent. *Sraaddha* (with accent on first 'a') means Hindu/Indic death rituals. The other word has accent on the last 'a' that means faithful devotion.

Shudrachi (In Tamil) a woman belonging to a *shudra* caste, or a 'lower caste'. Often an upper- caste (usually a Brahmin) woman who is less diligent with caste practices of purity and impurity is indicted as *Shudrachi*.

Shudras Shudras are at the bottom of the four-fold caste system, who are to 'serve' the top three castes—Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya. Shudras, unlike the top three, do not have the 'twice-born' status.

Sita Sita is one of the principal characters in the *Ramayana*, named after her husband Rama.

slokas A couplet of Sanskrit verse consisting of two sixteen-syllable lines of two eight-syllable *padas* each. (Sanskrit *lokah?*, sound, hymn, *sloka*.)

Sugreeva See Rama's slaying of Vali

Sulabh The pay-per-use public toilets managed in India by Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.

Swami Vivekananda Swami Vivekananda (12 January 1863–4 July 1902), born Narendranath Dutta, is the chief disciple of the 19th century mystic Ramakrishna, and the founder of Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda was the Hindu missionary to the West. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Vedanta and Yoga in Europe and America and is also credited with raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a world religion during the end of 19th Century. Vivekananda is considered to be a major force in the revival of Hinduism in modern India.

Syeds The Islamic practice of addressing a male dignitary or the title for those directly descended from the family of Prophet Muhammad.

Syrian-Christian(s) Syrian-Christians are a religious group in Kerala. They are believed to have converted into Christianity under the influence of St Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Christ.

Taluqdar During the Mughal and the British times, a *taluqdar* or *talukdar* (from Arabic/ Hindi *taluk* for 'district' and *dar* for 'holding') was an important official, collecting land revenue.

Tarai The area of northern India and southern Nepal running parallel to the lower ranges of the Himalayas. *Tarai* or *Terai* means 'moist land'. The eastern part of the *Tarai* is known in West Bengal and in Bangladesh as the *Duars*.

Thali A Hindi word for 'plate' or 'meal', as in North Indian *Thali*.

Tilak, taraju aur talwar, inko maro joote chaar An anti-upper-caste slogan by the BSP (also see *Hathi nahin*…), which means 'beat Brahmin, Bania and Rajput with *chappal* (sandal)'. *Tilak* is a vermilion mark on the forehead symbolizing Brahmins, the priests;

taraju is scales used by traders (banias) and; *talwar* is a sword for Kshatriyas, the warriors.

Treta yuga See Dvapara yuga

Tsunami On 26 December 2004, a massive earthquake in Indonesia triggered off a Tsunami (Japanese for 'wave') in coastal areas in southeast and south Asia and also Africa, killing an estimated 225,000 people. The number of deaths in India was between 12,000 and 18,000. There were reports in India that relief and rehabilitation efforts witnessed lower castes being discriminated.

Tsundur A village in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, where eight Dalits were massacred by upper-caste persons on 6 August 1991. In 2007, a court found 21 accused guilty and sentenced them to life imprisonment.

Upanayanam (Sanskrit lit. 'near-sight'), also called 'sacred thread ceremony', is commonly known for being a Hindu rite-of-passage ritual where the concept of Brahman is introduced to a young boy. Traditionally, the ceremony was performed to mark the point at which boys began their formal education. *Upanayanam* is performed only by the three upper castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya). Also see Poonal(s)

upar mein bhagwan hai, and neeche mein IAS hai A Hindi expression equating a bureaucrat with god. 'God in heaven and the IAS (Indian Administrative Service) on the earth.'

Vaidya A Shudra caste in Bengal. Also known as Baidya.

Varnashrama Dharma Though contested, *Varnashrama Dharma* is used interchangeably with the caste system, wherein the society is divided into four *varnas*/castes. Scholars debate whether the *varna* was originally based on birth or profession, i.e., whether the hierarchy was rigid, etc.

Zamindar Of Persian origin, it denotes one who holds or owns land. *Zamin* (land) and *(dar)* holder or occupier. A landlord.

ISBN 9788131754399

ePub ISBN 9788131799208

Head Office: A-8(A), Sector 62, Knowledge Boulevard, 7th Floor, NOIDA 201 309, India.

Registered Office: 11 Local Shopping Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India